Winter 2005

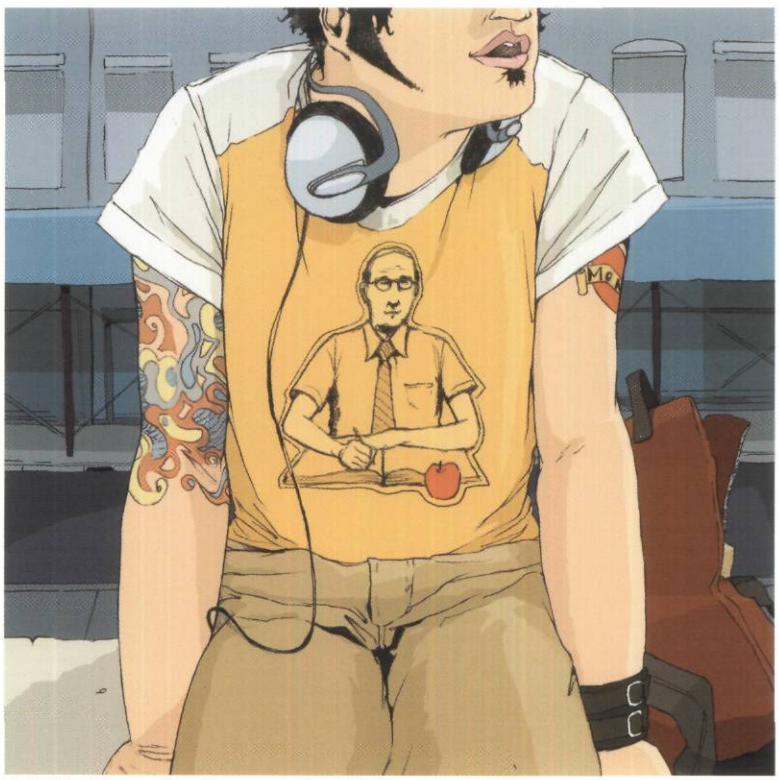
EDUCATION next

A JOURNAL OF OPINION AND RESEARCH

Character Education

Tough Love at the Hyde Schools

JAMES TRAUB



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Paying Teachers Properly, What's Wrong at the NY Times, *An NCLB Lawsuit Fizzles, Chicago's Social Promotion Controversy, What Teachers Are Taught*

CONTRIBUTORS: BRAD BUMSTED, THOMAS DEE, ROBIN JACOB, BRAD JUPP, JULIA KOPPICH, ALEXANDER RUSSO, LEWIS SOLMON, DAVID STEINER

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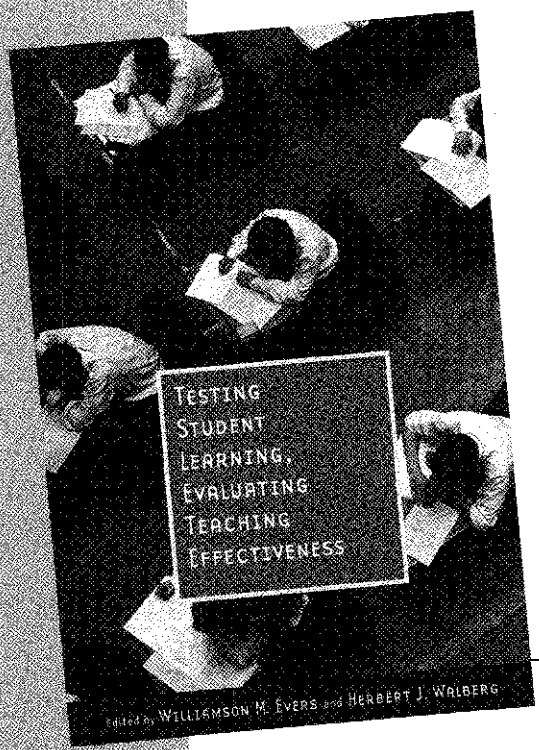

Testing Student Learning, Evaluating Teaching Effectiveness

More than ever, parents want to know how much their children are learning and how their childrens' schools rank compared to others. And even though some education experts may disagree, politicians and the public are increasingly insistent that objective testing and accountability are needed to measure the results of teaching.

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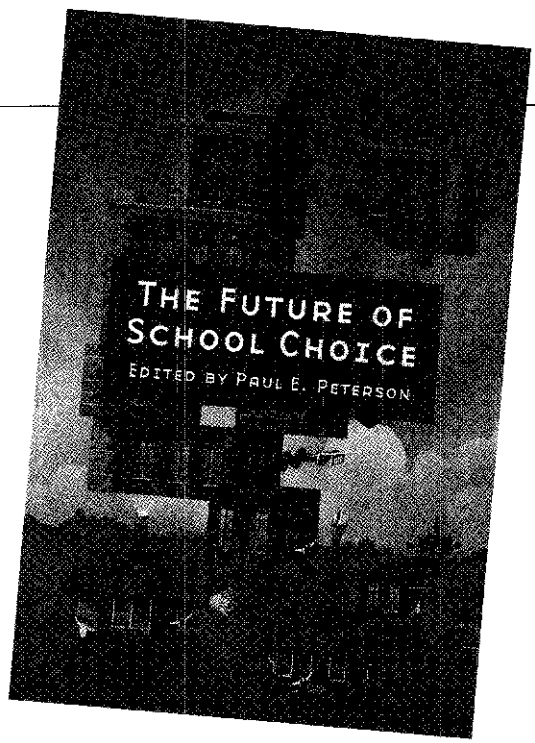

The Future of School Choice

In the most anticipated decision of its 2002 term, the Supreme Court ruled, in the case of *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris,* that the school voucher program in Cleveland, Ohio, did not violate the Constitution's ban on the "establishment" of religion. Opponents of vouchers were predictably disappointed but pledged to fight on.

In *The Future of School Choice,* a group of distinguished authors examine the meaning of the recent Supreme Court decision and consider the new political and policy context it has created.

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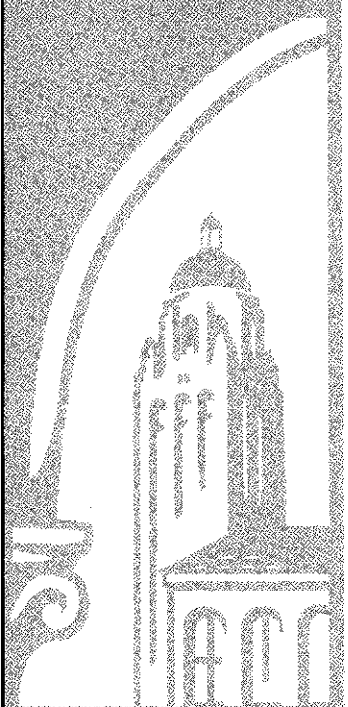

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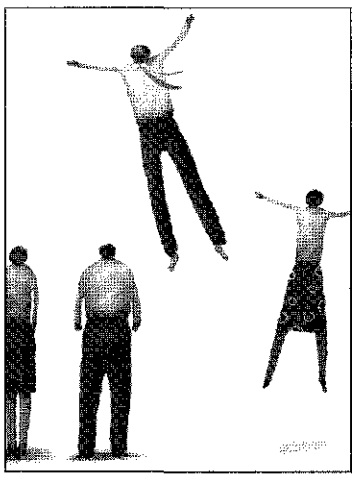

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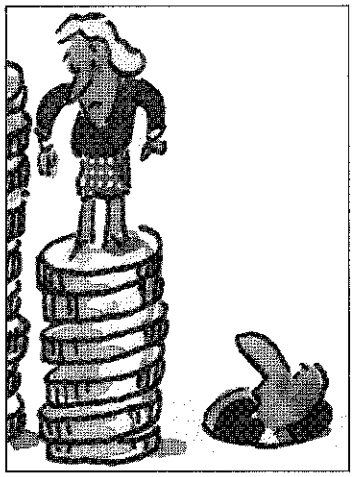

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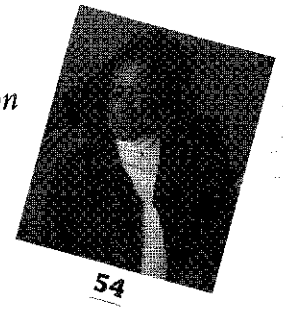
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Paying Teachers Properly

The Writing Is on the Wall—So What Are We Waiting For?

That the uniform salary "schedule" for teachers is obsolete and dysfunctional is a truth widely accepted but rarely challenged.

Just about everyone with experience in public schooling knows what a teachers' salary schedule looks like. (You can see a specimen in our *Forum* section, accompanying Brad Jupp's story, "The Uniform Salary Schedule," page 10.) Along one axis are 15 or so "steps," usually based on years of experience in that school system. Across the other are categories of teacher "qualifications," with higher pay depending on how many university courses and degrees the teacher has acquired. In the specimen from Denver, for example, a "step 1" teacher (in this case, that's a step above "new hire") with a bachelor's degree is paid $32,971, while a "step 10" teacher with a master's degree earns $46,860.

Such schedules have three profound failings. First, they pay no attention to the labor market for people possessing a specialty. Thus the gym teacher earns exactly the same as the AP physics teacher, who earns the same as a middle-school social studies teacher, though all know that their job options outside of teaching are entirely different.

The United States cannot radically upgrade teacher quality as long as an archaic pay system persists.

Second, they pay no attention to the relative challenge of teaching in particular schools within a district. Thus an instructor in the toughest downtown high school gets paid the same as one teaching in the most serene of suburban-like elementary schools. Especially for poor districts, such schedules—usually devised and agreed to via collective bargaining—make it brutally hard to manage the educationally productive distribution of limited dollars and human resources.

Third, they ignore teacher effectiveness. Despite all we have learned about huge differences in teaching skills and the profound impact such differences have on children's learning, the mediocre (or worse) teacher earns exactly the same as the classroom superstar.

Insane, no? It's impossible to picture how the United States will radically upgrade the quality of its three-million-member K–12 teacher cadre, attract more able people to enter and stick with this field, ensure needy kids' access to the best instructors, or span the curriculum with people who really know their subjects as long as this archaic, civil-service pay system persists.

This issue's *Forum* section illustrates the emerging consensus, bringing together three people who might otherwise have very different perspectives on public education. On this they agree: It's time to replace the uniform salary schedule with something that takes account of (at minimum) subject specialty, school environment, and classroom effectiveness. The *Forum* also illustrates some of the tantalizing innovations now visible on this front, from Denver's pioneering teachers' pay system to the Milken Family Foundation's Teacher Advancement Plan.

The innovations, however, remain tiny and tentative alongside the massive challenges.

Timorousness in the face of obdurate teacher unions (Denver being a happy exception) is perhaps the greatest cause of our halting progress in this domain. But reformers must also face the reality that getting an alternative system properly calibrated, making it work, and holding onto it are exceptionally challenging.

This we can see in Thomas Dee's account of Tennessee's 13-year attempt to install a workable "career ladder" for the Volunteer State's public-school teachers (see "Dollars and Sense," page 60). Despite the fact that it seems to have enhanced teacher effectiveness, issues arose from day one. Whether to "ration" the upper rungs of the ladder or let all teachers ascend it. Whether to judge teachers' readiness to climb according to their students' achievement, supervisors' (or peers') appraisal of their classroom prowess. What's fair to teachers? What's administratively workable? What can the state afford? What will the union tolerate?

In the end, just about every Tennessee teacher clambered onto the career ladder. Salary differentials shrank; grounds for ascending became ever more diverse and less exacting; and never did the program deal with such variables as subject specialty or working conditions.

A failed experiment? No, a cautionary tale: Everyone knows we must erase the uniform salary schedule. But close attention must be paid to what will replace it.

– CHESTER E. FINN JR.

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.

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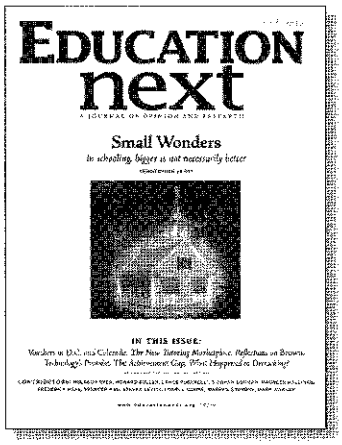
Supplemental Services

Siobhan Gorman's "Selling Supplemental Services" (*Feature*, Fall 2004) was informative and engaging, but, like much of the discussion on the subject, it furthers a theme that school districts are the "bad guys." I would like to share a different perspective on the role and responsibilities of school districts in implementing No Child Left Behind.

NCLB is, without question, the most comprehensive and complex piece of legislation concerning education in the history of our country. But it had an implementation date of six months after it was signed (January 2002). This impossibly short timeline created tension between school districts and tutorial providers right from the start. The federal government did not have all the guidelines for implementation ready in July of 2002, nor did states even have their lists of state-approved providers ready by that date. This bumpy start led some providers to suspect that school districts were avoiding implementation so they could use the set-aside Title I dollars for other purposes.

The Supplemental Educational Services section of NCLB was a compromise agreed to by Congress when the voucher plan failed. It almost appears as though some in what Gorman calls "the popular crowd" believe if they can convince all the right people that school districts are bullies, are weighed down by conflicts of interest, and have no incentives to implement the program, school districts will be excluded as approved providers. Supplemental Educational Services is an attempt to privatize public education by using public funds for private vendors.

No Child Left Behind is the right thing to do. It may have its flaws and need some modifications, but it is seeking to put the resources in the right places. I believe in the Supplemental Educational Services program, and I welcome outside vendor partners.



However, we all should be represented at the table when critical issues or concerns are discussed, not just the popular crowd.

JOHN LIECHTY
Associate Superintendent
Extended Day Programs
Los Angeles Unified School District

Keeping Good Teachers

If more governors had exhibited Mark Warner's excellent grasp for what it would take to improve the teaching profession, terms such as "Highly Qualified Teachers" and "High Objective Uniform State Standard of Evaluation" might not have entered our lexicon ("Netting an Elusive Breed," *Feature*, Fall 2004). Not only does the Virginia governor understand what needs to be done, but he also shows, with program initiatives, what's possible.

One key point of Warner's template, however, needs a word of caution. Warner proposes that states need to champion more high-quality mentoring programs to reduce teacher attrition. But like many sweeping fixes to education woes, such mentoring programs can bear little resemblance to what inspired them. Our high-poverty schools, for instance, may provide the rhetorical urgency to stop these schools from bleeding new teachers every year, but the remedies tend to be spread too thin across too many schools.

The Public Education Network surveyed teachers in West Virginia who were required by their states to get a visit from a mentor every week. The survey revealed that many of them were lucky to see their mentors once or twice a semester. Not the state's fault? Absolutely not, but mentoring has always had severe shortcomings of this nature. Caveat emptor.

Mentoring also is most likely to be mishandled and work least effectively in the most dysfunctional schools, the schools that have the hardest time holding on to new teachers. There are good reasons why teachers leave these schools in droves, and it usually has more to do with their peers and the principal than with the kids they teach. It may well be that the schools that Governor Warner wants to help most will solve their dysfunction only with significant and simultaneous infusions of *new* staff as well as the kinds of turnaround principals that Warner so aptly observes are needed.

If states didn't insist on helping all schools equally, they could afford the Cadillac versions that high-poverty dysfunctional schools need.

KATE WALSH
President
National Council on Teacher Quality

Governor Warner is to be applauded for recognizing that *retention* of teachers is the real crisis in school staffing. The conventional wisdom is that we can't find enough teachers to do the job—but the truth is that we can't keep them. A third of all new teachers leave the classroom after three years, and close to half leave after five years. More than a quarter of a million teachers stop teaching every year.

The student achievement gap won't be closed until we close the teaching quality gap, and to do that every school must attract and retain highly qualified teachers. High attrition rates undermine the teaching continuity, coherence, and community that are so essential to good schools. Typically, urban

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and rural schools serving poor and minority students have the highest turnover rates, and as a result they have the highest percentages of first-year teachers, the highest percentages of teachers with fewer than five years of teaching experience, the lowest paid teachers, and the lowest percentages of accomplished teachers. These conditions create a vicious cycle in high-need schools that undercuts the ability of those schools to attract and retain well-qualified teachers.

As a nation we have attempted to improve teaching quality by increasing the supply of teachers for hard-to-staff schools. However, the heavy emphasis on keeping these schools supplied with teachers is focusing the energy for improvement on recruitment rather than on the need to change the conditions that make these schools so hard to staff in the first place. This strategy has protected the status quo in dysfunctional schools.

As a former business executive, Governor Warner understands that when an organization is losing valuable human resources it is because someone else is offering them better conditions and more rewarding career opportunities. Three components of his program are particularly significant.

First, he begins in the right place: rewarding teachers for performance and modifying the current teaching incentive structure to pay teachers more for taking on the most challenging assignments.

Second, Governor Warner's mentoring initiative is noteworthy for requiring districts to show that their mentoring programs are improving retention. It is unacceptable to hold students accountable for meeting standards that their schools are not staffed to help them meet. It is time to hold school leaders accountable for reducing the turnover and attrition that undermine teaching quality in high-need schools.

Third, the governor's initiative also calls for changing state and district incentive structures that drain quality teachers and resources from the schools that need them the most. It is time to establish formulas to ensure adequate funding that are based on per-pupil *needs* in lieu of per-pupil *averages*. School financing policies should be driven by an analysis of what it costs to raise the bar and close the gap in student achievement, bringing teaching and learning opportunities in all schools up to a high standard.

TOM CARROLL
President
National Commission on Teaching and America's Future

Multiple Intelligences

It is a shame that Daniel T. Willingham is unable to link empathy and imagination with his commitment to the science of psychometrics in his stinging critique of multiple intelligences theory ("Reframing the Mind," *Check The Facts*, Summer 2004).

If he could, then he might be able to see a completely different scenario when the child comes home from school enthusiastically explaining how he finally learned all of the vowel letters by forming their shapes with twigs he gathered on one of his many rambles in his backyard woods. I suspect that a parent's mind would not be as closed as Mr. Willingham's as he senses his child's newfound joy in learning because he is respected for his unique intellectual gifts and not "left behind" like he was by all the other teachers whose primary focus was the test scores and not the child.

I share Mr. Willingham's concern that multiple intelligences (MI) theory be tested for its scientific validity. I have spent the past 17 years investigating the validity and reliability of an MI assessment that provides both quantitative and qualitative data. My recent work includes a 12-nation cross-cultural study and factor analyses studies of 20,000 North American adults and teenagers. These extensive and rigorous analyses support the essential structure of MI theory.

It is telling that Willingham does not argue against the existence of human abilities outside the academic domains, such as kinesthetic skill, musical talent, and social insight. The question is whether we dare to call them "intelligences." If we do, then it means that they should be included in the hallowed realm of the school curriculum and not slighted as "mere" talents or aptitudes to be exercised only during extracurricular activities.

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Howard Gardner's definition goes beyond the convergent problem-solving abilities associated with IQ to include "the fashioning of products" and providing of services that are valued within a community. This stretching of the cognitive envelope means that we must value creative thinking and practical problem solving and interpersonal skill as on par with math and reading.

BRANTON SHEARER
Chair, Multiple Intelligence Special Interest Group, American Educational Research Association

Daniel Willingham replies:
Shearer confuses several issues. First, Gardner proposed Multiple Intelligences (MI) as a theory of mind, not as a method to instill joy of learning. I therefore evaluated it as a theory of mind. Second, as a theory of mind, its *essential* structure has never been in question because, as noted in my article, Gardner's theory included factors of human ability similar to those of many theories that preceded his. What was new in Gardner's theory was (1) his proposal of how those abilities are related; (2) his criteria for identifying intelligences; and (3) his labeling as *intelligences* what others have called *abilities*. I argued that his characterization of the relationships among abilities is known to be incorrect and that the criteria are flawed. Third, I tried to shed light on why "daring" to relabel abilities as intelligences has led to applications Gardner did not intend, one of which Shearer advocates. Shearer asserts that status as an intelligence "means [it] should be included in the hallowed realm of the school curriculum." Gardner disagrees, arguing that matters of curriculum are independent of the structure of intelligence.

Small Schools

The findings in Christopher Berry's "School Inflation" (*Research*, Fall 2004) add to an impressive mound of evidence documenting the advantages of small schools.

Early-20th-century advocates of large and consolidated schools, such as James Conant and Ellwood Cubberley, never dreamed that someday three out of five high-school students would attend schools comprising more than 1,000 students, with some schools having over 4,000 students. Conant's idea of a large school was 400 students, and the schools Cubberley wanted to consolidate were mostly rural one-room schoolhouses with an average size of well under 100 students.

Recent studies have found that students in schools with about 100 students per grade generally score higher on tests, pass more courses, and are more likely to stay in school, graduate, and go on to college. Hundreds of these high-quality small schools already exist around the country, with 250 more scheduled to open in the fall of 2004. Many of these schools are graduating at least 80 percent of their students and sending them off to college, even while facing significant challenges, such as serving high levels of low-income, minority, and special-needs students.

It is important to remember that small size is not a solution in and of itself. But it does create an environment that fosters success.

It is important to remember that small size is not a solution in and of itself. But it does create an environment that fosters success. Our own evaluation studies have shown that in small schools students say their teachers know them better, care about them more, and have higher expectations of them. As a result, students are challenged and focus on achieving. Additionally, teachers are better able to collaborate and develop a common vision.

While the achievement gap between white students and their low-income, minority counterparts on tests has received a great deal of attention, the gap in high-school graduation rates is even more critical. Nearly half of our nation's African-American and Hispanic students drop out of high school, and fewer than a fifth graduate ready for college. This graduation gap is the most important economic, civic, and social problem of our time. As research points out, small schools improve life outcomes by helping more students graduate, thus providing them with the opportunities to attend college, find meaningful employment, and become productive citizens.

Small schools can also help boost graduation rates among these underserved students by providing them with a new version of the three Rs—rigorous academic coursework, meaningful relationships with instructors who can help them meet high standards, and relevant learning opportunities through internships, community partnerships, and real-world tasks.

To help more students attend these more effective schools, our foundation is investing in community-based efforts to create new high-quality small schools and smaller learning communities within larger schools. But our goal is not to create more small schools; it is to help more low-income and minority students graduate ready for college, work, and citizenship.

TOM VANDER ARK
Executive Director
Education
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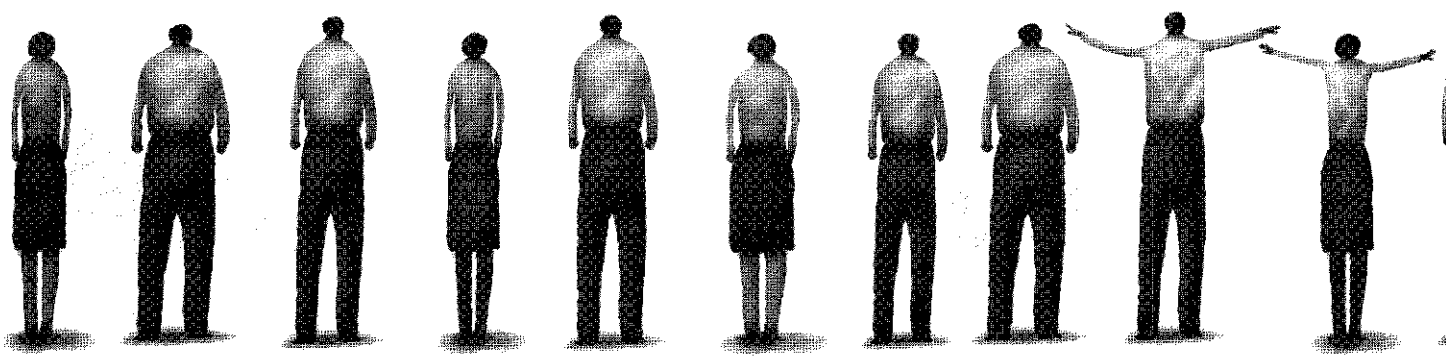
What's

The "teacher famine," complained New York University education professor Adolphe Meyer, was caused by "economic cheeseparing. . . . First-rate men and women have long since turned their back on chalk and blackboard; but now it is becoming difficult to attract even those of a lesser caliber." If the complaint sounds dated, it is. Meyer was writing in 1957. Plenty of things have changed since then, including the total amount of money we spend on public education—now, almost $11,000 per student, more than any other country in the world. "Cheeseparing" today comes less from a parsimonious public than from an inefficient and ineffective salary distribution system, as our three *Forum* contributors—Lewis Solmon, Brad Jupp, and Julia Koppich—suggest. It is not that average salaries are terrible, but that our best teachers are paid little more than our worst. What is remarkable is that Solmon, a former education dean, Jupp, a union leader, and Koppich, a "new union" advocate, agree that the debate is no longer whether to throw out the single salary schedule by which most of our teachers are paid, but what to replace it with. On the pages that follow, they offer provocative—and concrete—proposals for paying teachers what they are worth while providing students with an education they deserve. As Jupp says, "We are in an exceptional moment, one where the single salary schedule can no longer support the pressures placed on it."

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVID CUTLER



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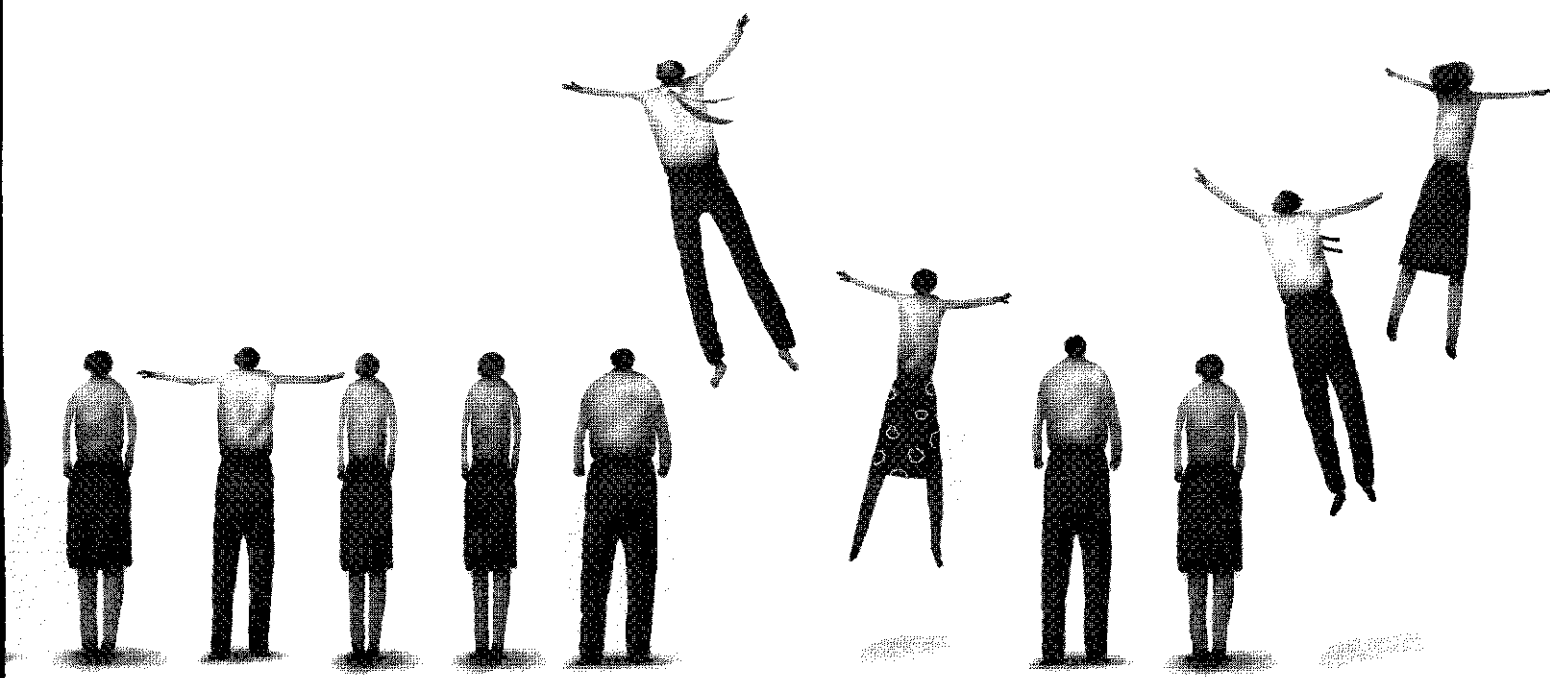
a TEACHER Worth?



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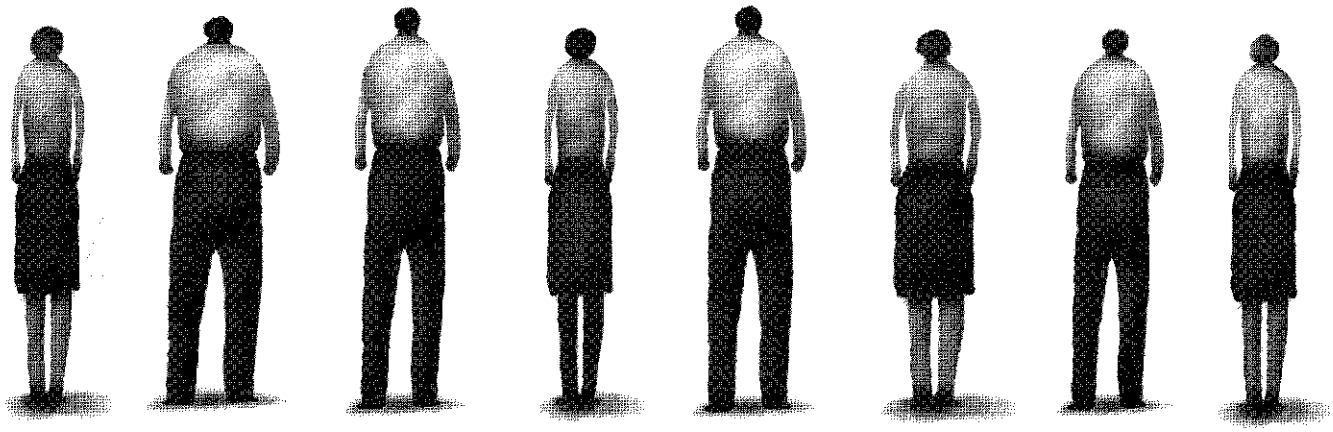

The Uniform SALARY SCHEDULE

A Progressive Leader Proposes Differential Pay

For at least two and a half decades, political leaders and opinion makers have been telling teachers and union leaders like me that it is high time to move away from the single salary schedule. For a long time it was easy for us to dismiss those calls for change. This was partly because as a profession we are more remote from the policy debate than we should be, but it is also because we believed that many of those engaging in the debate were ax grinders, more interested in dismantling public education as an enterprise than improving it.

Recently, though, with more voices joining the choir calling for change, it has become difficult to write off the differentiated pay advocates. The 1996 report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, "What Matters Most," was a wake-up call. Here was a report that placed the highest value on the teacher, even as it recommended "develop[ing] a career continuum and compensation systems that reward knowledge and skill." Since then, other important pro-teacher groups, like the Progressive Policy Institute, Public Agenda, and the Teaching Commission, have taken even stronger positions. In his paper "Better Pay for Better Teaching," Bryan Hassel, who is a researcher for the Progressive Policy Institute, raises the stakes by saying, "In addition to better pay, we must move toward a better pay system. We should reward teachers not just for experience, but for their skills, knowledge and, ultimately, the performance they bring into their classrooms."

Less obvious was the pressure from within the ranks of our profession. With the exception of Public Agenda's report, "Stand by Me," I have found little research on teachers' perceptions of alternative compensation. In Denver, however, my union, the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, which represents approximately 4,500 teachers, and independent researchers commissioned jointly by the union and the Denver Public Schools, developed an extensive body of perceptual data that showed teachers as open-minded to changes in the ways they are paid.

BY BRAD JUPP

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Surprising Data from Teachers

Though Denver had a typical salary schedule (see Figure 1) our data overthrow many of the preconceived notions held by teacher unions, school administrators, policy leaders, and opinion makers about how teachers perceive compensation systems. Since 1998 our union has asked its members what they thought about incentives for "teaching at schools with the highest percentage of high-need students." By 2003, when the last available survey was conducted, the number of people favoring these incentives had reached 89 percent. The percentage of teachers who favor incentives for "teaching in content areas of short supply" is only slightly less, at 82 percent.

The union has also asked its members, "What percentage of your pay should be based on accurately measured student growth data?" Respondents were given multiple-choice options of none, 1 to 5 percent, 5 to 10 percent, 10 to 25 percent, and 25 to 50 percent. In 2002 and 2003 no single choice received more than half of the responses, but the fact that fewer than half of the teachers surveyed selected the first choice, none, is remarkable; it means that for two years' running more than half of the union members surveyed believe that some portion of their pay should be based on accurately measured student growth.

In fact, Denver teachers have shown surprising open-mindedness about merit pay programs. The Denver Public Schools, with the collaboration of the teacher union, launched a Pay for Performance pilot program in 1999 and, when it ended in 2003, started a more comprehensive Professional Compensation System for Teachers (ProComp). Our independent researchers discovered a surprising amount of support for merit pay by teachers in both programs.

The hallmark of the Pay for Performance pilot was paying teachers $1,500 bonuses for meeting measurable objectives set collaboratively with their principals and based on the academic growth of the students they taught. When asked in the spring of 2003, just as the pilot program was ending, to rate whether setting measurable objectives for bonuses of up to $1,500 had an impact on "cooperation among teachers," 53.2 percent of the participating teachers said the impact was positive; only 2 percent said the impact was negative. While this positive response is certainly dependent on the special nature of the objective-setting process in Denver—a process in which teachers collaborated directly with their principals to set goals based on individually measured baselines for the students they taught, in the subject matter they taught—this response still flies in the face of preconceptions that teachers fear pay for performance based on student growth because it will harm collegial relations.

Even more surprising were the results that came from phone polls conducted in January and March of 2003 asking teachers their opinions on ProComp just before the vote to adopt the new program. When we ran demographic cross-tabulations of the results, we found that the teachers most likely to ratify ProComp were male secondary teachers with 13 or more years of service in Denver Public Schools. Though perhaps influenced by the special circumstances ProComp created—it lifted a cap on annual salary increases that, due to our single salary schedule, became effective following the 13th year of service—the results refuted the stereotype of the change-averse senior teacher.

Puttering toward Reform

The common perception that current salary scales are set in stone also overstates the case—at least with respect to the Denver metro area. The salary scales in each of the nearby districts we examined displayed evidence of gradual tinkering in response to political pressure. I have not found rigorous national research on this subject, but comparisons of metro Denver salary schedules conducted during the development of ProComp found, according to independent researcher Douglas Rose, that all the public school districts routinely "showed strong hints of incremental decisionmaking." When experienced teachers, for instance, want additional salary increases, steps are added at the top. And boards of education want to compete in the marketplace for entry-level teachers, so early sections of the salary schedule are artificially inflated. Lower rates of pay are also established for probationary teachers or teachers with emergency licenses. Some districts in our area have even made nominal efforts at reform. Denver has market incentives for teachers of English Language

Denver's Salary Schedule (Figure 1)

With relatively low starting salaries and guaranteed raises over time, the current Denver Public Schools salary schedule is typical of compensation schemes for teachers. Each step represents a year of teaching.

	B.A.	M.A.	DOCTORATE
New Hire	$31,320	$31,779	
Step 1	$32,971	$33,454	$39,169
Step 2	$33,073	$33,697	$40,903
Step 3	$33,225	$35,101	$42,642
Step 4	$33,480	$36,503	$44,377
Step 5	$33,785	$38,093	$46,251
Step 6	$33,988	$39,671	$48,219
Step 7	$35,421	$41,337	$50,250
Step 8	$36,912	$43,087	$52,449
Step 9	$38,456	$44,924	$54,702
Step 10	$40,092	$46,860	$57,057
Step 11	$41,784	$48,843	$59,521
Step 12	$43,566	$50,944	$62,082
Step 13	$45,546	$53,401	$64,919

SOURCE: Denver Public Schools

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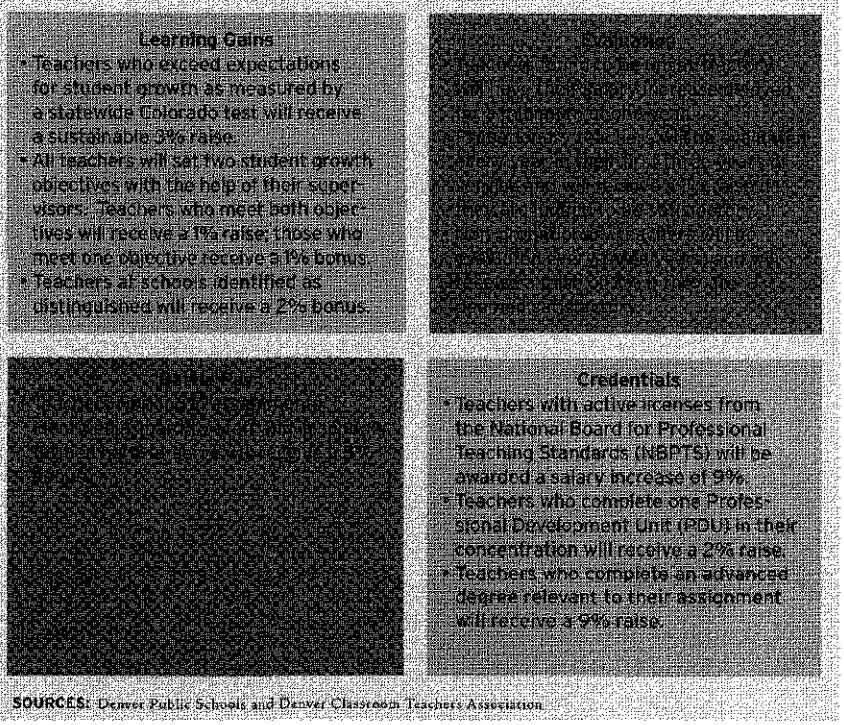
Acquisition. Another district, Jefferson County, experimented for a couple of years with a program granting rewards to teachers for completing approved projects.

For all of the changes that have been slapped onto the existing schedules, however, it is safe to say they amount to nothing more than accommodations to internal and external pressures, small alterations that accomplish little or nothing in the work lives of teachers or the learning of students. These are not the radical new systems called for by the National Commission for Teaching, the Teaching Commission, Public Agenda, or the Progressive Policy Institute.

Merit and Battle Pay in Denver (Figure 2)

Denver teachers hired before 2006 have a choice between the traditional salary schedule and this four-dimensional merit pay system. Teachers hired after January 1, 2006, will automatically enter the new system.


Learning Gains
• Teachers who exceed expectations for student growth as measured by a statewide Colorado test will receive a sustainable 3% raise.
• All teachers will set two student growth objectives with the help of their supervisors. Teachers who meet both objectives will receive a 1% raise; those who meet one objective receive a 1% bonus.
• Teachers at schools identified as distinguished will receive a 2% bonus.
Credentials
• Teachers with active licenses from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) will be awarded a salary increase of 9%.
• Teachers who complete one Professional Development Unit (PDU) in their concentration will receive a 2% raise.
• Teachers who complete an advanced degree relevant to their assignment will receive a 9% raise.

SOURCES: Denver Public Schools and Denver Classroom Teachers Association

What the Mile-High City Did

In Denver, we developed ProComp to take our teachers further down the road toward a new form of thinking about compensation (see Figure 2). Compared to the system that it replaces, ProComp is a comprehensive approach to merit pay:

- It ties teachers' pay directly to professional accomplishments, including demonstrated knowledge and skills, as well as to student academic growth;
- Salary incentives are also provided for work in hard-to-staff assignments and hard-to-serve schools;
- A "menu" of extra earning opportunities, available to the entire work force, is spelled out, as are bonuses available to specific job categories;
- Teachers are eligible for every incentive earned—there is no cap on such earnings. A special-education teacher, for instance, teaching in an English Language Acquisition assignment and working in a school with the highest level of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch, would receive three bonuses, one for each of three eligible areas.

We also designed the system so it could be sustained across education careers. Using a financial analyst, we developed a 50-year model so that teachers could count on career earning expectations and not just pick up an extra bonus or two now and then. At the same time we built a system around a commitment to change. ProComp is grounded in a nine-year collective bargaining agreement, instead of the normal one- to three-year cycle. This should ensure that it is not a policy du jour, but lasts long enough to establish and prove itself. And we tied the system to larger district goals in order to provide clear educational incentives while keeping pressure on the bureaucracy to both perform and improve.

ProComp has its limits—it is rooted in compromise; the timeline for implementation is slowed by the need to build district financial and instructional capacity; it does not raise entry pay and provides relatively slow growth in annual earnings; many incentives are too small to really meet demands of the market—but I believe it points in some important new directions.

For people impatient to see the single salary schedule get out of the way, ProComp is not ambitious enough. In the final analysis, I think they are correct. ProComp is not an educational "silver bullet" or even a comprehensive solution to the unsolved problem of how to build a new form of teachers' pay.

We recognize, however, that we are in an exceptional moment, one where the single salary schedule can no longer support the pressures placed on it by the expectations of a 21st-century public education system. Fortunately, Denver teachers recognized those new realities. On March 19, 2004, the proposal was ratified by a decisive margin (59 percent to 41 percent) of union members, with 2,700 of the union's 3,200 voters—well over half of the district's 4,500 teachers—casting votes.

We look forward now to testing what we have developed. We want to use the momentum for change to improve both the teaching profession and the schools where our teachers work.

Brad Jupp is a member of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association and the Teacher/Coordinator of the ProComp Project.

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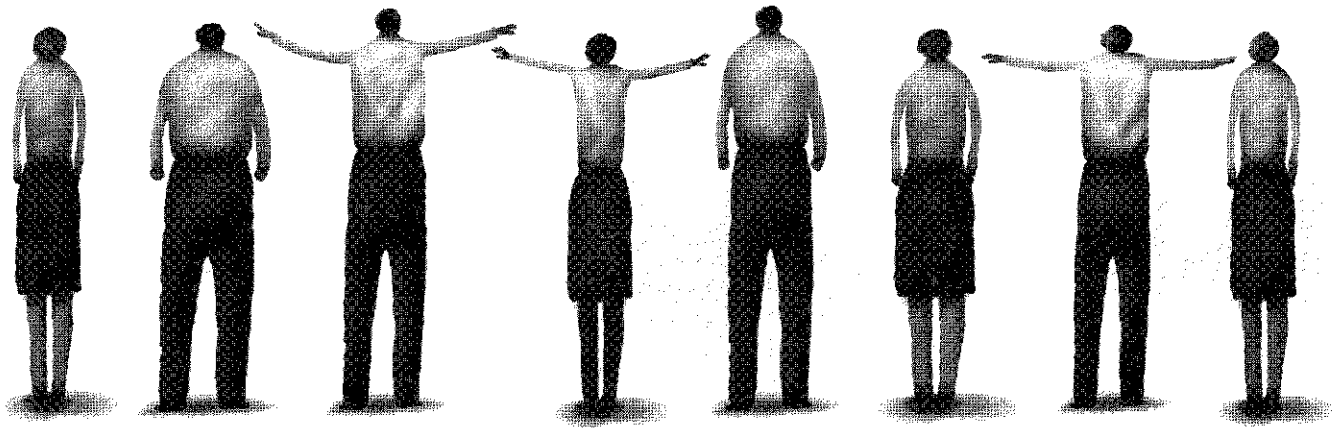

All Teachers ARE NOT THE SAME

A Multiple Approach to Teacher Compensation

It is by now a familiar story, often told as a lament: teachers in this country continue to be paid according to the single salary schedule.

They accrue better pay on the basis of years of experience and college units earned. Units may or may not be related to teaching assignment. Some districts have modestly tweaked this arrangement by paying a premium to teachers who earn certification through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. But by and large, in thousands of school districts across the United States, the unvarnished standard single salary schedule prevails.

Teacher unions, among the staunchest defenders of the standard compensation arrangement, are often credited—or blamed—with inventing this salary calculus. In fact, the classic teachers' salary arrangement is an artifact of civil service. Developed in the early 1920s, the system was popularized three decades later as a way of creating salary equity between elementary teachers, most of whom were women, and secondary teachers, most of whom were men. This was not a pre-feminist revolution so much as a necessary economic response to the

BY JULIA E. KOPPICH

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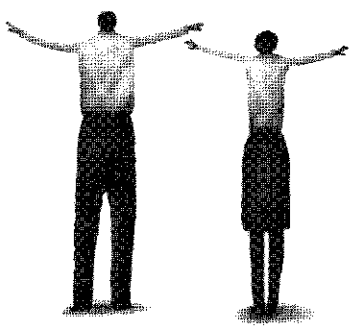
post–World War II enrollment boom. Over time, to be sure, teacher unions have come to defend the standard single salary schedule in the name of employee equity and fairness.

The National Education Association assiduously avoids anything that might be construed as "merit pay." The position taken by the American Federation of Teachers is less rigid, yet replete with caveats to protect against anticipated slights and abuses. The unions' position is not unwarranted. Merit pay schemes that have been tried in education have an abysmal track record (see "Dollars and Sense," p. 60, for one that had a decent record—while it lasted).

Those individuals who were not meant to be teachers are soon out of the profession. Struggling tenured teachers are given the support they have long needed.



Part of the problem, however, has been that merit pay systems are rarely based on objective standards, a flaw that often created unhealthy competition for the usually scarce resources rather than cooperation among teachers. These insufficient funds all too typically forced many teachers to take their rewards solely in the form of psychic remuneration.

Compounding the compensation dilemma, policies promoted by both districts and unions have endeavored to maintain the fiction that "a teacher is a teacher is a teacher." Compensation structures have failed to recognize that some teaching jobs are more difficult than others or that some teachers are more—or less—skilled than others.

Salaries for the Real World

The time has come for school districts and teacher unions to take a different tack. It is time to develop and implement a professional compensation arrangement that recognizes the complex nature of the work of teaching and that compensates teachers for both the difficulty of the assignment and the professional accomplishment that is part of it.

We need a compensation structure that utilizes multiple approaches. These should include paying teachers more for: 1) attaining knowledge and skills that demonstrably contribute to improving student learning; 2) mentoring newer and less skilled teachers; 3) teaching in hard-to-staff schools and choosing difficult-to-staff subjects; 4) producing higher test scores, using a value-added approach.

These ideas fly in the face of long-established tradition. But it's time to reexamine that tradition. It's time to acknowledge publicly that some teaching jobs are more difficult than others. And we must be willing to pay more for some fields than for others. In a perfect world, perhaps, a physics teacher is no more valuable than an English teacher. But we do not live in a perfect world. We live in a world in which physics teachers are at a premium, and for the foreseeable future supply and demand will need to prevail. The market must have its way.

Some will argue that what is suggested above is too complicated, that it is time to scrap the old salary schedule and pay teachers on the basis of their students' test scores alone. After all, assert proponents of this argument, isn't the true measure of a teacher's worth her students' test results? In fact, at the base of this argument lies the same fault line that threatens No Child Left Behind. Making judgments about student learning by simply examining test scores from one year to the next is hazardous at best. Tests provide a simple snapshot in time and may not be well aligned with standards or curriculum. Moreover, particularly in urban districts, given the rate of student transience, the cohort of students tested at the beginning of the year may be different from that tested at the end of the year, thus providing few useful comparative data.

The New Math for Merit

But there is a way to use test scores to gain needed information about the impact of teaching and the levels of student learning: value-added calculations. The value-added approach has the advantage of separating student effects (ethnicity, family background, socioeconomic status) from school effects (teachers, administrators, programs) since it examines test scores to determine if students are making anticipated academic gains each year. Measured on the basis of their progress from the previous year, students, in a sense, act as their own statistical control. Value-added programs calculate a projected test score for a student in a given grade or subject based on his or her previous academic achievement. The difference between the actual score and the projected score is the value added.

Value-added calculations, however, should not be used as the sole gauge of teachers' compensation. They too are an imperfect technology. But they can, and should, serve as one important measure. Consistent value-added work by William Sanders in Tennessee has shown that several consecutive years of teachers' adding measurable value to students' learning provide a foundation on which students can continue to make academic progress. After several years of ineffective teaching, students may never recover academically.

Finally, it is not possible to discuss teachers' compensation without taking up the issue of their evaluation. In most places, evaluation is done poorly, with checklists about behavior standing in for standards of good practice that should frame evaluation systems. Administrators typically in charge of the

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process have too little time or training to effectively help teachers improve their practice.

But there is an effective alternative to the ineffective evaluation as well. Systems of peer review, in place for a decade or more in a dozen or so districts—such as Toledo and Columbus, Ohio; Rochester, New York; and Montgomery County, Maryland—have shown remarkable promise. Beginning teachers are provided the support they need from specially selected experienced teachers, who are chosen jointly by the district and the union. Those individuals who were not meant to be teachers are soon out of the profession. Struggling tenured teachers are given the support they have long needed. Should that not prove adequate, they are encouraged to find other lines of work. Conventional wisdom notwithstanding, teachers, including unionized teachers, are able to judge their colleagues fairly but rigorously. Yes, some teachers are dismissed. More important, evaluation accomplishes the purpose for which it is intended: improving professional practice.

Working with Complexity

Marrying a well-developed system of peer review and value-added test scores could create a powerful framework for teachers' compensation. Adding pay for knowledge and skills, compensation for mentoring, and pay for teaching in hard-to-staff schools and subjects will transform a pro-forma salary schedule into a professional compensation arrangement that better recognizes the complexity of teaching and offers teachers the kinds of incentives and options that professionals deserve.

Salaries by themselves, no matter how high or competitive, will not encourage teachers to remain at schools where the working conditions are poor. Competent, supportive administrators, a decent physical plant, and requisite instructional supplies are the *sine qua non* for maintaining a quality teaching staff, regardless of the rate of pay.

In sum, it is time to construct a salary schedule that gives teachers choices, opportunities, and options—pay for knowledge and skills, pay for mentoring, added pay for hard-to-staff schools and subjects, and added compensation for test scores calculated using a value-added approach.

The hope is that progressive unions and districts will take up the challenge to shape this new salary construct. They will come to see rethinking compensation as part of their obligation to promote quality teaching, and as the next step on the road to creating a true profession.

Julia E. Koppich is an education consultant based in San Francisco. A former high school teacher and faculty member in the school of education at the University of California, Berkeley, she is also coauthor of United Mind Workers: Unions and Teaching in the Knowledge Society.

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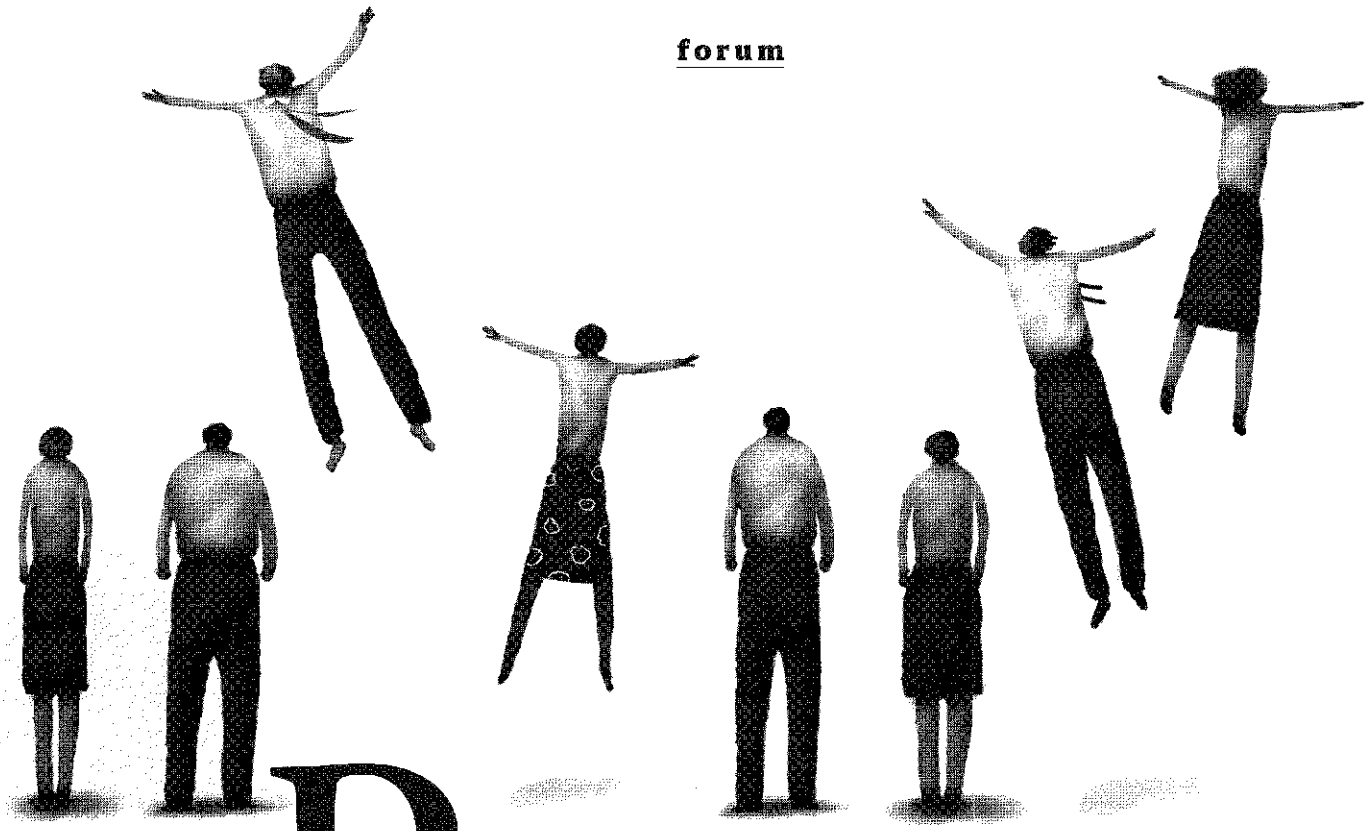

Recognizing DIFFERENCES

Let's Reward the Good Teachers

For more than a century, public education has worked under a single salary schedule that compensates teachers for college credits, education degrees, and years of experience, but not for their effectiveness in the classroom. (See Figure 1.)

In fact, research shows that the degrees, courses, and experience that teachers have, beyond the first few years of teaching, are unrelated to how much their students achieve. Furthermore, the current salary schedule does not normally take into account the fact that teachers work in schools offering different levels of nonmonetary benefits, such as a safe, pleasing environment. Nor does it recognize that students come to class with different levels of preparation and home support.

Paying all teachers with the same experience and credits the same salary also ignores the fact that graduates of different fields have vastly different alternative career options; think of a physicist compared with someone having a bachelor's degree in elementary education. School administrators report that it is very difficult or impossible to fill elementary teaching positions about 6 percent of the time, while positions in math, physical

BY LEWIS C. SOLMON

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sciences, and special education are difficult or impossible to fill more than 30 percent of the time. According to the American Federation of Teachers, the estimated starting salary for teachers with a B.A., in 2003–04, regardless of discipline, was $30,496. The National Association of Colleges and Employers tells us that the average starting salary for accountants that year was $41,110, and for graduates in computer science, $49,691. (See Figure 2.) Starting salaries for mathematicians with a B.A., the year before, averaged $40,512; for physicists with a B.A. in 2002, according to the American Institute of Physics, $78,000. Is it any wonder that it is so difficult to hire and retain math and science teachers?

Extra pay for those in hard-to-staff fields would acknowledge the laws of supply and demand—greater opportunities for math or science majors bid up their earnings in other careers, so getting them into teaching requires competitive salaries. It would not mean that physics teachers are more important than elementary teachers.

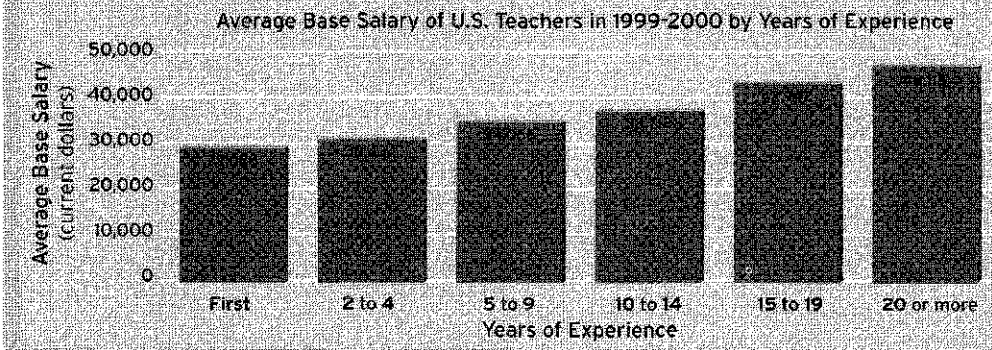
In the current system, an increase for one teacher requires increases for all. If, for instance, we decided that our teachers are underpaid, as state officials from all parts of the country tell me, current practice would make a meaningful pay increase prohibitive. Just to bring the salaries in the below-average states to the national average would cost $8.5 billion—an amount that is fiscally irrational. It may seem like a meaningless argument, except that such an amount is dictated by the current uniform salary schedule, which requires those below-average states to raise each teacher's salary. It would be much cheaper—not to mention more educationally effective—to raise the salaries of just the most-effective teachers, those deserving of the increase, rather than all teachers. Then there would be money available to give larger raises to the very best teachers.

It would be similarly impossible to bring all teachers' salaries up to the average level of other professions. Why would we want to pay more to the least-effective teachers anyway? What we end up with, then, are paltry average annual increases (as teachers gain experience and course credits), ranging from the high of a $1,498 average increase in California to a meager $503 at the low end in South Dakota.

In the Madison School District in Arizona, the lowest salary for a new teacher with only a bachelor's degree is $31,304 and the highest salary after many years and 72 postbaccalaureate credits is $57,251, an 82 percent increase over a career! Compare that with the legal profession, where the lowest-paid 10 percent earn less than $44,490 and the highest 10 percent earned more than $145,600—a 227 percent difference! The flat salary schedule for teachers is a good reason for those in Madison to welcome the stipends of $6,250 that the district offers to its "master" teachers, who take a leadership role among the faculty, and the bonuses averaging $3,400 to teachers who exhibit outstanding classroom performance and student achievement.

Patience as a Virtue (Figure 1)

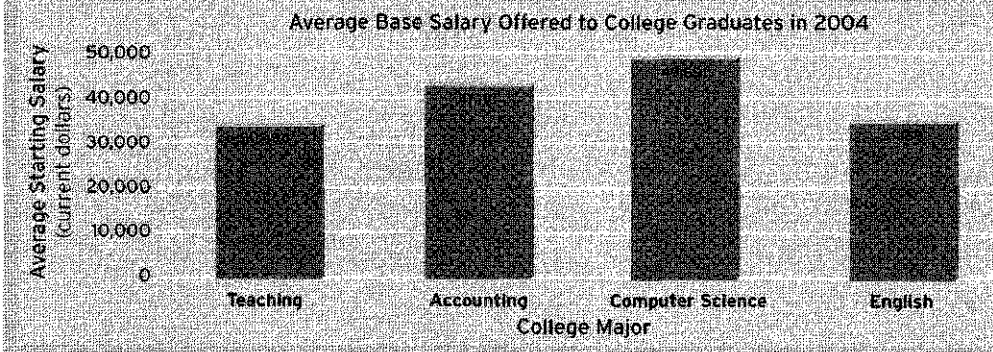
Under the rigid salary structure of many public school systems, teachers must work for more than 20 years before they can earn a $50,000 annual salary.



SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics

Compared to the Private Sector (Figure 2)

Starting salaries for teachers are competitive when compared to college graduates with a degree in English, but less so for those graduates who specialized in a field that requires mathematical skills, such as accounting or computer science. (Salary figures do not include benefits.)



* This is the estimated beginning salary for the 2003-04 year as provided in the AFT 2003 Survey and Analysis of Teacher Salary Trends.

SOURCES: National Association of Colleges and Employers, American Federation of Teachers

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The traditional K–12 compensation system is obsolete in that it is no longer useful, but, sadly, it is not obsolete, because it is still in use.

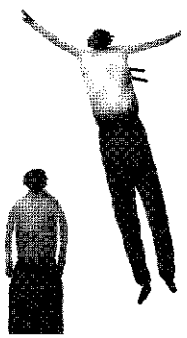
The Teacher Advancement Program

For the past four years, the Milken Family Foundation, founded in 1982 and based in Santa Monica, California, has been working through its Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) in Madison and in more than 60 other schools—mostly elementary and middle schools and a few high schools—around the nation to change the way teachers are evaluated, helped to grow professionally, and compensated.

The TAP is a systemic reform of public schools intended to attract, motivate, develop, and retain high-quality talent in the teaching profession. It has four key elements:

- Multiple career paths allow teachers to pursue a variety of positions throughout their careers—career, mentor, and master teacher—depending on their interests, abilities, and accomplishments. As they move up the ranks, their qualifications, roles, and responsibilities increase—and so does their compensation. When teachers take on more responsibilities, they should receive more pay. The old career ladder programs failed because the best teachers were honored with new titles and more work, but with meager, if any, extra pay.
- Performance-based accountability evaluates teachers' effectiveness through a comprehensive, research-based system that combines such criteria as position responsibilities, classroom observations, and students' gains in test scores.
- Ongoing applied professional growth requires a change in the school schedule that allows time during the regular school day for teachers to learn, plan, mentor, and share with other teachers so they can constantly improve the quality of their instruction.
- Market-driven compensation allows schools to compensate teachers on the basis of their performance and the performance of their students.

One of the things we know is that there are few careers, except teaching, in which professionals are not held accountable for their failures and rewarded for their accomplishments.



Attracting—and Keeping—Effective Teachers

One of the things we all seem to know is that there are few careers, except teaching, in which professionals are not held accountable for their failures and rewarded for their accomplishments. So why, political constraints aside, do we insist on giving raises to reward a teacher's longevity instead of his or her job performance?

For the past 17 years the Milken Foundation has worked with state superintendents to recognize and reward K–12 educators with a $25,000 gift—no strings attached—for outstanding and effective performance. Of the 1,977 recipients of the Milken award, we know that 1,653 of them are still working. Of these, 281, or 17 percent, have left their school buildings to take jobs at a district office (154), a nonprofit organization (47), a university (41), a federal or state government office (24), or a private company (15).

Unfortunately, we do not know whether this 17 percent turnover among Milken award recipients is better or worse than among those equally experienced and outstanding teachers who do not receive the awards. But we do know that 46 percent of all teachers leave the profession in the first five years and that, anecdotally, the Milken awards have created an aura of excellence about the profession that enhances the environment that our TAP research shows is so important to teacher retention. The very fact that these teachers have opportunities beyond the classroom increases the attractiveness of the profession as a whole.

However, when no compensating salary is awarded for teaching in difficult or undesirable schools, it is easy to understand why the best teachers may choose to teach in the most rewarding and pleasant environment available, moving from low to high socioeconomic status schools when the opportunity arises. Extra compensation is thus needed for those teaching in hard-to-staff schools where conditions are difficult, dangerous, or unpleasant. Defying that pattern, however, some very talented teachers in Arizona are moving from socioeconomically advantaged schools that are not using the TAP to schools of low socioeconomic status that are. Over the past three years, 61 teachers have started working at the two schools of lowest socioeconomic status in the Madison school district, both of which are using the TAP. Of these teachers, 13 (21 percent) have come from schools in high socioeconomic areas in Madison or nearby districts, and they are among the best teachers from the area. They are attracted by the more interesting professional development, the enhanced collegiality, and the opportunity to earn more by being effective.

We want teachers who love kids and want to help them learn, but that does not mean they cannot be interested in compensation as well. Physicians seek to prevent or cure diseases, and some lawyers seek to dispense justice, but that does not bar the best of them—but not all of them—from earning large incomes as well.

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Student Outcomes Count

Teachers should be rewarded for producing useful student outcomes, most notably, student learning gains, measured by value-added standards (i.e., improvement) rather than by levels of achievement at the end of a course. This method takes into account differences in where students start as well as differences in out-of-school factors that teachers cannot control. Looking at gains rather than levels of achievement also adjusts for the fear that performance pay will make all teachers want to teach the highest-achieving kids. When student improvement is rewarded, there may be financial benefits to teaching students who have the longest way to go—it may be easier to get a 25 percentile gain from someone starting at the 30th percentile than a 15 percentile gain at the 80th percentile. Providing incentives for teachers to make their students learn more may encourage teachers to do so, but, perhaps more importantly, it will compensate them for the extra effort required to improve the skills that will help their students achieve.

Another issue involves incorporating a school's nonacademic goals into a merit pay system. As we know, schools are expected to develop students' social behavior, career preparation, and positive attitudes. The most hackneyed of these has been enhanced student self-esteem, which sometimes is used as a reason for not failing students who deserve to fail. Let it simply be said that a great way to enhance a student's self-esteem is to have her achieve something academically. Holding teachers accountable for students' academic achievement gains is not inconsistent with students' accomplishing other things in school.

Standards without a Straitjacket

Despite the need to keep the focus on academic achievement, the Teacher Advancement Program acknowledges that research has identified pedagogical methods that help students learn, so it includes evaluation of classroom skills as part of its teacher compensation system. This allows teachers to be rewarded if they do everything right, even if their students' scores do not increase.

A key to this part of the performance evaluation, of course, is developing clear criteria for measuring those classroom skills. Multiple evaluations are conducted by certified evaluators. This helps overcome teachers' fears of bias and nepotism in their evaluations. Moreover, by including principals in the school-wide performance bonus system, they too will have an incentive to ensure that the most-effective teachers are rewarded.

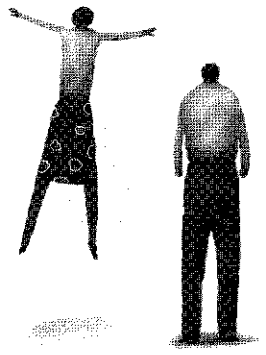
Will such rubrics reduce teachers' opportunities to be creative in their teaching, to try new approaches, to teach as they like? Probably not, because the other test of teacher competence is better student outcomes. Thus the rubric gives credit for the skillful exercise of proven teaching methods, regardless of student outcomes, as well as rewards for student success, regardless of teaching method.

Fix the Whole System

The initial success of these performance- and responsibility-based compensation systems suggests that there are alternatives to the traditional "step-and-column" pay in which no one will earn less than in the traditional system. All teachers who reach certain goals get a bonus; but 50 percent of that bonus is awarded for teaching skills (a classroom-based evaluation) that are not tied to student outcomes and 50 percent for student achievement gains that are not part of the teaching skills evaluation. Furthermore, half of the student outcome bonus is based on school-wide gains and half on gains by an individual teacher's students.

In the three years that we have been using the TAP system, we have found that the school-wide rewards part of the bonus encourages teachers to work together to make everyone more effective. There is the possibility of the "free rider," of course: ineffective teachers reaping benefits from the achievements of their more-effective colleagues. Thus we expect part of the bonus to be based on individual teacher results. All bonuses must be significant or the extra work involved in implementing such a system will not be deemed worthwhile. That means, for instance, that a master teacher in Madison, Arizona, could get a bonus worth as much as 17 percent of his or her salary compared with the 2–3 percent bonus that current salary structures usually set as a cap for such expert teachers.

Teachers should be rewarded for producing useful student outcomes, most notably, student learning gains, measured by value-added standards.



We have learned that performance pay alone is not enough. It must be supported by a strong, transparent, and fair evaluation system, and by a professional development plan that helps teachers to deal with revealed deficiencies and to improve. Teachers may resist evaluation not because they are unwilling to be held accountable, but instead because they fear they do not know what to do to improve student achievement. If professional growth opportunities are available to help teachers improve, the resistance to being evaluated fades.

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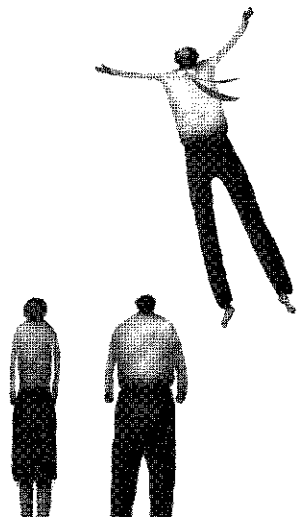
A professional development program should use student data to identify areas where teachers need help. It should then have teachers help other teachers improve their teaching and student learning. This fosters collaboration and reduces the competitive attitudes that some fear are engendered by performance pay. Indeed, as long as my receiving a bonus does not preclude anyone else's getting one also, fears of competition and failing to collaborate go away. At schools using the TAP, striving for the annual performance awards improves teaching and enhances collegiality and morale.

We have learned that performance pay must be supported by a strong, transparent, and fair evaluation system.



One cautionary note: Most school districts are constantly trying to get more money for their teachers. So some will agree to a performance pay plan, but then transform it into an across-the-board salary hike: defining high performance as things everyone does (taking classes toward an advanced degree), setting standards so low that everyone gets the maximum award, or giving all teachers the same evaluation. Districts must guard against such behaviors.

Can It Last?

Merit pay plans are expensive, especially if the performance awards are added to the salary schedule, so there are questions about whether the extra funds will continue to be available during the next economic downturn. What if the superintendent or school board turns over? Will results be demanded too quickly, and will the program be discontinued if test scores do not rise in a year or so?

Establishment of a dedicated funding source, such as an increase in the property tax levy or sales tax, could ensure sustainability. The former has been accomplished in Eagle County, Colorado, and the latter has the potential to support performance pay in the state of Arizona, where voters passed a law in 2000 to raise the sales tax by $0.006 and dedicated 40 percent of the proceeds to performance pay. In fact, most districts in Arizona ended up defining performance pay in ways that gave all teachers the same increases (for example, by allowing more course credits to fill the requirements for meritorious work). The district using the TAP was one of the few that actually used the money for real performance pay. The bottom line, though, is that support and advocacy by teachers is key to sustainability.

Although many teachers initially view performance pay and accountability as contentious issues in reform, absolute levels of acceptance for all the principles embodied in the TAP are high. Since the inception of the TAP, surveys of teachers' attitudes toward the elements of the program show that collegiality and teachers' satisfaction have remained strong in the schools using the TAP. This finding refutes many who argue that pay for performance leads to increased competition and divisiveness. These attitudinal results reflect the holistic approach of the TAP, which combines an accountability system having clear rewards and a professional development system to support all teachers (veteran and novice) in improving their classroom instruction.

Another important way to ensure sustainability is to show that the program is working. There is always the fear that results will be demanded too soon, and then the program will be discontinued if test scores do not rise in a year or so. We now have three years of results from TAP schools in Arizona and two years from TAP schools in South Carolina. We compared 25 year-to-year changes in student achievement in TAP schools to control schools. In 17 of these cases, or 68 percent of the time, the TAP schools outperformed their controls. This compares favorably with the results of a RAND evaluation of schools that have initiated other comprehensive school reform programs. RAND concluded that 50 percent of the schools with these reforms outperformed the control schools in math and 47 percent outperformed the control in reading, although these schools had been operating for a substantially longer period of time than the schools using the TAP. One important anecdotal explanation for the success of the TAP is that teachers in schools using the program improve significantly because their performance evaluations are related directly to TAP teaching rubrics.

Any pay-for-performance plan in K–12 education will succeed only if teachers buy into it from the start, if it is fair, and if it is embedded in a systemic reform that supports all aspects of performance reward, especially those that encourage teachers to become better at their craft. Such a pay plan will be revolutionary, but will not become obsolete in any sense of the word.

Lewis C. Solmon is executive vice president, education, at the Milken Family Foundation and director of its Teacher Advancement Program. He is the former dean of the Graduate School of Education at UCLA.

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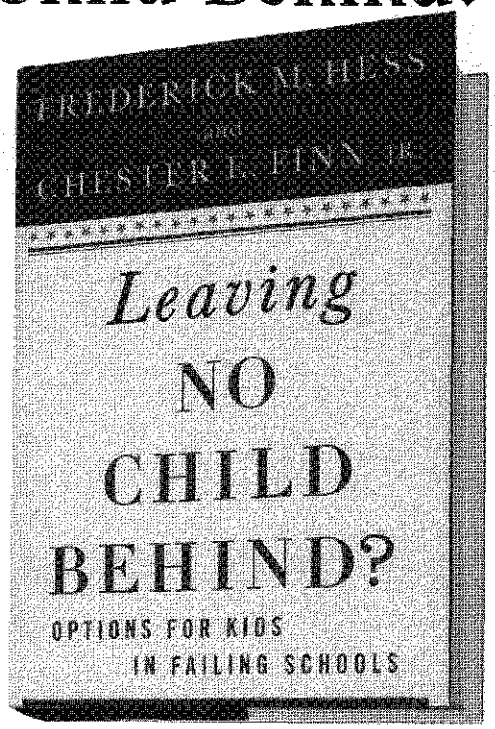

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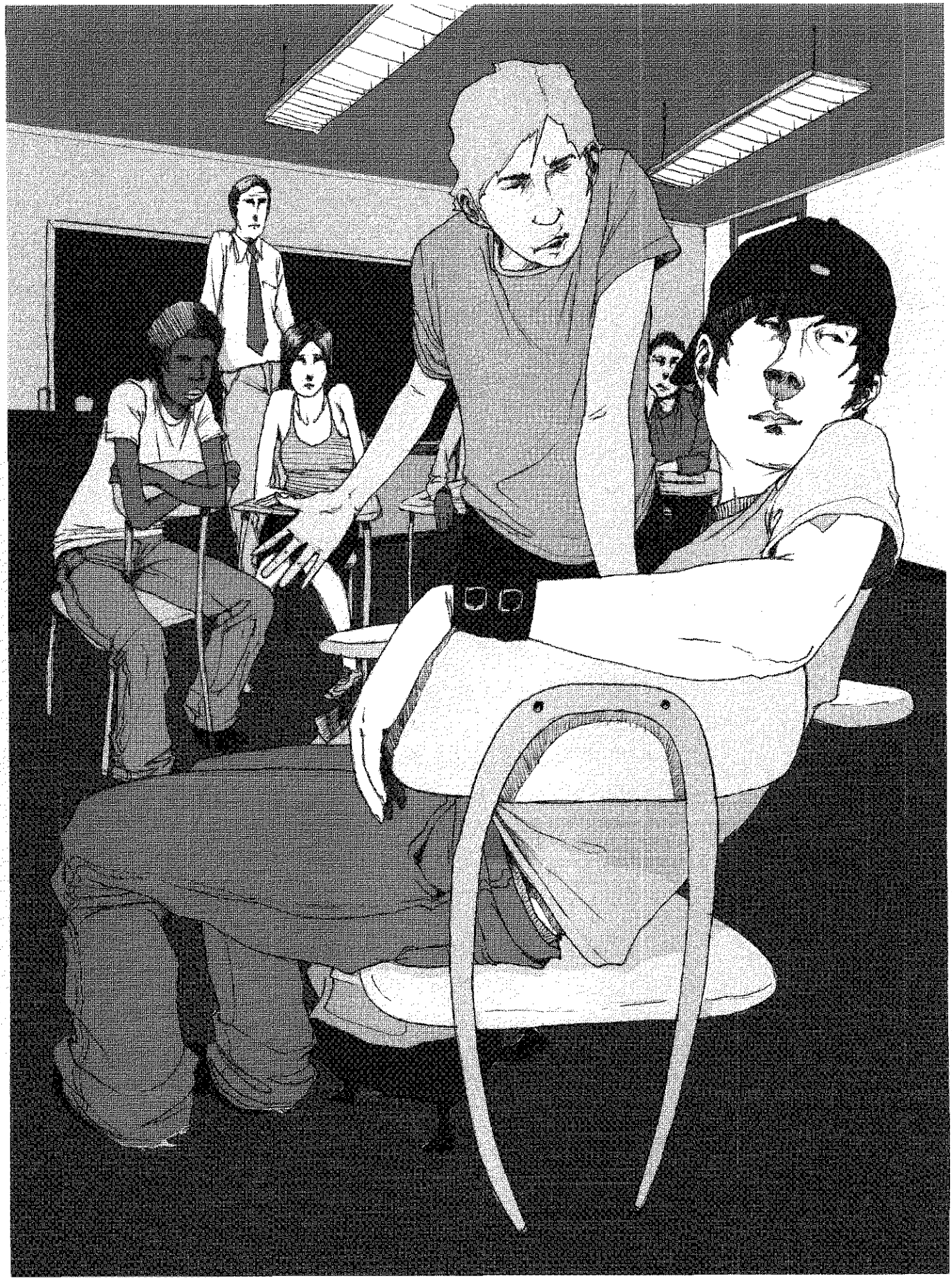

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The *Moral* Imperative

Character Education, Soul by Soul, at the Hyde Schools

BY JAMES TRAUB

Earlier this year, at the Hyde School, a private high school in Bath, Maine, dedicated to "family-based character education," I witnessed a confrontation in an 11th-grade honors English class the likes of which, it is safe to say, few educators or scholars have ever seen. The teacher, Barbara Perry, asked if everyone had finished reading the assigned novel, Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*. All but two of the dozen or so students had. It was a Monday, and Perry asked Brad, one of the two, if he had done any of the reading at all over the weekend.

"No," said Brad. "It was a really rough weekend for me. I've had a lot of trouble with believing in myself, and I've been trying to figure out where it comes from. Mr. Gauld [Malcolm Gauld, president and CEO of the Hyde Schools] thought it came from my father, and I should talk to him. I brought it up, and he got really upset."

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Radical truth telling, accompanied by an ethos of mutual responsibility known as "Brother's Keeper," lies at the core of Hyde's vision of character development.

One of the kids jumped on Brad. "You say you don't believe in yourself, but you don't give yourself an opportunity to believe in yourself. It's like how you didn't go to lacrosse practice on Saturday. I don't know how not doing your work, not going to lacrosse, is going to make you believe in yourself."

A chorus of "uh-huh"s rose around the room. Miss Perry said gently, "Do you know what you're doing?"

"Do I know what I'm doing?" Brad repeated, in a heartbreakingly toneless, defeated voice. "Hardly."

And now the other students tried to direct Brad to the deeper causes of his malaise. He was, they said, holding something back. "I'm really worried about you," said one of the girls.

A boy turned to Brad and said, "I was talking about you to my mom yesterday—how you have this reputation for being the kid who fluctuates the most. It's up to you whether you're going to be in charge or not."

Brad listened silently. Finally, he said, "So I guess I should leave now?"

"It's up to you," Miss Perry said. Brad pushed his chair back, gathered up his books, and left. And only then did the class begin to discuss *The Farming of Bones*.

Both students and teachers assured me that this exercise in tough love was nothing out of the ordinary at Hyde; several kids said that they had been on the receiving end of it themselves, to their lasting benefit. Radical truth telling, accompanied by an ethos of mutual responsibility known as "Brother's Keeper," lies at the core of Hyde's vision of character development. And these principles are meant to guide the conduct of not just the students but all the adults in what is very consciously referred to as "the Hyde community"—teachers, administrators, parents. Everyone is obliged to hold everyone else to the standards they themselves would wish to be held to. The Hyde experience is, if nothing else, exhausting.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE HYDE SCHOOL

All 13 of last year's seniors at Hyde graduated, enrolled in four-year colleges, and made it through the first year. All 30 of this year's seniors are scheduled to attend four-year colleges.

A Secular Morality

The Hyde School is scarcely typical of schools professedly dedicated to character education; it is, if anything, the extreme case, where principles that elsewhere have been applied halfheartedly have been most deeply considered and uncompromisingly followed. Hyde is, in fact, so peculiar, so supremely dedicated to its eccentric founding principles, that it's not easy to imagine the school's serving as a useful exemplar of anything. Nonetheless, Hyde schools are now flourishing in Woodstock, Connecticut, and in the inner-city systems of New Haven, Connecticut, and Washington, D.C. The school's founder, Joseph Gauld, Malcolm's father, says that he hopes to have charter schools operating in New York City and Oakland, California, by 2005. In the great, ongoing laboratory project known as whole-school reform, Hyde may turn out to be the leading entry under the heading "character education."

And a very large heading it is, too. (See sidebar.) Thomas Lickona, the head of the Center for the Fourth and Fifth Rs (the fourth and fifth being respect and responsibility) at the State University of New York at Cortland and a leading figure in the field, says that two-thirds of the states' schools are now required either by legislative mandate or by administrative regulation to implement programs in character education. The U.S. Department of Education has been awarding grants in the field since 1995; the No Child Left Behind Act

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From *McGuffey's Reader* to Musical Chairs: A Brief History of "Character Education"

The expression "character education" would have seemed a redundancy until quite recently in history. Virtually all elite private education, whether at prep schools or colleges, was designed to ensure that young men of the better classes were prepared for the leadership positions in government and the professions to which they were destined. And the public schools were unabashed about their role in turning the children of immigrant families into Americans. Not until the age of John Dewey and the progressives was this inculcation of civic and personal virtue questioned: Dewey mocked the rigid pieties of *McGuffey's Reader* and called for a pedagogy that would liberate the child's own questioning nature, that would replace inculcation itself with a more "child-centered" form of learning. And by midcentury, as a test-driven meritocracy made deep inroads into the old world of inherited privilege, character began to take a back seat to intellect at the elite institutions.

The modern character education movement began as a reaction to the aggressively value-neutral school culture that emerged thanks to this combination of progressivism and meritocracy. In *The Closing of the American Mind*, which appeared in 1987, Alan Bloom wrote that among young people "openness" had ascended to the status of supreme moral principle, just as "relativism" had become axiomatic in philosophy. Bloom's call for a return to the search for truth and meaning, in school as well as in intellectual life, struck a deep chord, or so the staggering sales of his rather dense tome implied. At the same time, neoconservative thinkers like Gertrude Himmelfarb were extolling the much-denigrated virtues of the Victorian age. The word "virtue" itself began to take on an almost talismanic power, especially in the wake of William Bennett's *Book of Virtues*, published in 1992. The very willingness to use the word meant that you accepted the principle that some things were true and some were not, as against the woolly relativism and permissiveness that pervaded the schools.

This philosophical and ideological assault on liberal, secular-minded culture put character education on the public agenda. But many parents and educators who had no interest in fighting the culture wars lamented the generalized loss of authority of traditional institutions. They felt angry that schools had succumbed to an anything-goes ethos that was harmful to both the schools and the young people passing through them. The killings at Columbine and elsewhere seemed to offer terrifying proof that the schools had somehow lost their way. Schools had left the development of values to parents at the very moment when parents were leaving it to . . . whomever. This widespread sense of unease lent an impetus to the intellectual critique and shifted the debate toward less ideological and more pragmatic objectives.

Character education really took wing, before Columbine, in 1992, at a conference sponsored by the Josephson Institute of Ethics, in Aspen, Colorado. There a group of educators and ethicists agreed on a list of values—not virtues—that they felt transcended sectarian, partisan, or class distinctions. These were codified as "The Six Pillars of Character" (trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, citizenship). The following year, the institute established the Character Counts! program to help schools and communities incorporate the six pillars. At the same time, a group of civic and education organizations formed the Character Education Partnership, which now functions as the movement's clearinghouse and professional organization (and promotes its own "Eleven Principles" of character). President Clinton seized on the fledgling movement as one of the cost-free, nonpartisan initiatives he was then touting. The White House began sponsoring annual conferences on "Character Building for a Civil and Democratic Society" in 1994. And in 1996 the president gave the movement the ultimate blessing when he said, in his State of the Union address, "I challenge all our schools to teach character education, to teach good values and good citizenship." By that time, according to a survey by the National School Boards Association, 45 percent of school districts said they had instituted character education programs, while another 38 percent said they planned to do so. Thus the character education bandwagon swiftly became a juggernaut.

Education publishers now offer kits and exercises designed to teach every virtue and every value known to man. The Character Counts! folks, for example, offer a 45-minute lesson plan designed to teach caring to teens. The class begins with a moralized version of musical chairs, in which the kids

(continued on page 27)

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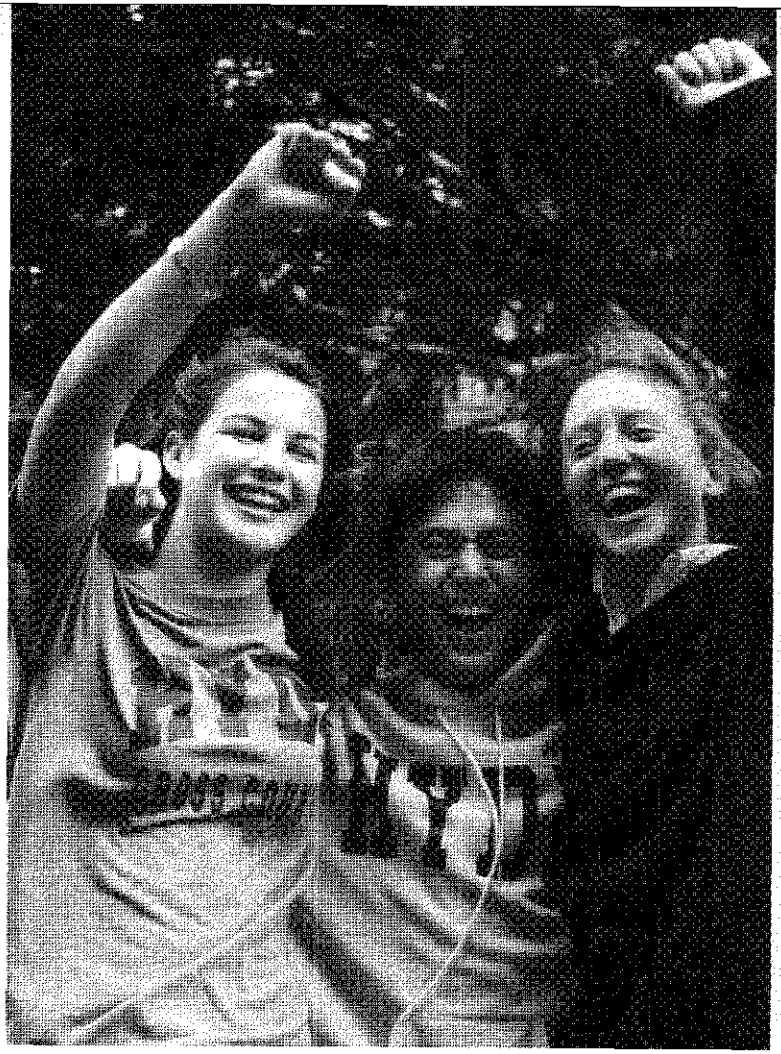
of 2001 established the new Partnership in Character Education Program, which gives $25 million annually to schools. In part, perhaps, because the very term "character education" evokes such an all-American image of wholesomeness and high moral purpose, this is one bandwagon that educators are almost sure to be climbing aboard in growing numbers.

Indeed, although the character education movement began essentially as the educational wing of a campaign of conservative moral uplift, it long ago shed those dowdy Victorian garments. Whatever values schools wish to propagate nowadays, whether multicultural sensitivity or teamwork, now travel under this glorious banner. And character education has come increasingly to be seen as an educational rather than a social reform, with measurable inputs producing measurable consequences, for both student behavior and academic performance. Indeed, if the vast and various character education movement is unified by anything, it is the conviction that schools can, and must, consciously and explicitly develop a healthy peer culture because such a culture is the indispensable foundation for successful learning.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE HYDE SCHOOL

If the vast and various character education movement is unified by anything, it is the conviction that schools can, and must, develop a healthy peer culture.

Hyde Origins

Like so many of the programs of reform now competing for primacy, the Hyde idea emerged entirely from the mind of one extremely determined and deeply dissatisfied individual. This was Joe Gauld, a math teacher and administrator at the New Hampton prep school in New Hampshire in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It was the early days of the burgeoning postwar meritocracy, and Gauld felt increasingly repelled by the ethos of "giftedness" and the honors track and the rat race for college placement. The schools, he concluded—not just New Hampton but all schools—were failing children by rewarding innate ability rather than seeking to draw out each child's "unique potential." And so this lonely dissenter from the post-Sputnik fixation on academic achievement quit his job as assistant headmaster in order to pursue his flinty New England faith in self-improvement and transcendence. Gauld ultimately scraped together the funds to purchase the 145-acre Hyde family estate in Bath, in southern Maine, and the Hyde School opened its doors in 1966. "Instead of relying on intellect to produce good grades and high test scores," Gauld writes in *Character First: The Hyde School Difference*, "students at Hyde learn to follow the dictates of their conscience so they can develop the character necessary to bring out their unique potential."

The kids demanded the right to smoke; Gauld refused. A boy of admirable character but limited intellect couldn't pass math; Gauld eliminated academic requirements for graduation for the entire school.

The history of the school, as Gauld recounts it, was a sequence of moral dramas in which the founder insisted on clinging to the original vision in the face of threats to Hyde's very existence. The kids demanded the right to smoke; Gauld refused. A boy of admirable character but limited intellect

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A Brief History of "Character Education" *(continued from page 25)*

form groups of three the moment the music stops. Some kids inevitably get excluded in each round. "How did it feel to be left out?" the teacher asks. "What words describe the way you were treated? Do students at your school ever treat other students that way in real life?" The teacher delivers a potted lecture on caring. She then produces a golf ball, which she tosses to a student, who is asked to "name something that makes people hard to like." The teacher asks, "Does a person's neighborhood, size, or color give us the right to drop our standards?" The instruction sheet does not indicate whether there is more than one answer to this question.

The tens of thousands of schools now obliged to institute character education programs need materials, and a world of providers stands ready to help them. A company called Integrity Matters offers "entertaining, attention-capturing character education videos" on 35 "basic moral values" (including "Virtue"). Tolerance is a mini-industry all its own, with manuals offering "proven strategies" to stamp out hate. A curriculum program called "The Seven Cs of Thinking Clearly" (Criticism, Creativity, Curiosity, Concentration, Communication, Correction, and Control) helps children identify "faulty thinking practices" by way of "The Stink'n Think'n Gang," a gang of no-goodniks whose members include Iwannit Now, Judge B. Fore, and—well, you get the picture. The most hopeful thing one can say about most of these lessons-in-a-box is that they are so hokey and tone-deaf that it is hard to imagine a child, even one of tender years, taking them seriously. At the same time, they constitute a terrible waste of a precious commodity. Whatever time you spend revamping your faulty thinking practices or stamping out hate is time you are not spending studying history or chemistry.

If tossing a golf ball while delivering stilted homilies about caring can be considered character education, it is probably safe to say that the field has a serious quality-control problem. But what about schools like Hyde or others that have taken this reform seriously? Are they effective? And if so, at what are they effective? Some studies have found that character education programs do, in fact, build character, though none of these studies is rigorous enough to be remotely definitive. The largest of them is a study by researchers at South Dakota State University of 8,419 students in schools that have adopted Character Counts! The study concluded that between 1998 and 2000 the number of students who reported various acts of cheating, stealing, drinking, drug taking, class cutting, and the like decreased significantly.

Many an ulcerous principal would be delighted to adopt a program that promised greater student compliance; this very prospect probably impels many schools to go the character education route. But a central premise of the field is that character is a matter not only of social behavior but also of accomplishment. This is what Thomas Lickona means when he says, "Virtue is human excellence. To be a school of character, a community of virtue, is to be equally committed to two great goals: intellectual excellence and moral excellence."

If this is so, then character education programs should improve academic performance. In the maiden issue of the *Journal of Character Education*, a team of researchers reports on a study of the relative academic performance of schools in California that described themselves as having substantial character education components. They concluded that performance on standardized tests from 1999 to 2002 was "significantly positively correlated" with "a school's ability to ensure a clean and safe physical environment," "evidence that its parents and teachers modeled and promoted good character education" and opportunities "for students to contribute in meaningful ways to the school and its community." The findings were based on self-reporting, which is scarcely conclusive. The researchers struck a note of modest hopefulness, but cautioned that "no evidence exists for a broader relationship that spans a range of character education approaches in a large sample of schools."

Should one expect such evidence to surface? Not if character education means pious sermonettes on tolerance. But even if virtue is understood as human excellence, it's naive to expect instant results. "It's all about how you tap into and help them exercise their will," says Karen Bohlin, coauthor of *Building Character in Schools*. "That's where the real work is. And we don't see the results immediately. The really stable dispositions show up much later." That may well be true, especially where character education has been densely woven into the fabric of intellectual life. You have to wonder, however, if the same will be true at a school like Hyde, where character is understood as a kind of antidote to excessive academicism.

–James Traub

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couldn't pass math; Gauld eliminated academic requirements for graduation for the entire school. Gauld demanded that teachers subject themselves to the same searching self-scrutiny as the kids; a third of them left, and Hyde soldiered on. The board forced Gauld out of his own school in 1980; Malcolm stayed on and was able to engineer his father's return five years later. After all these years of choosing purity of doctrine and bloodlines over pragmatic calculation, the Hyde School today has an atmosphere charged with the dedication to first principles of a religious community as well as the air of immemorial ritual of an old Maine summer camp. Only about 220 students, almost all of them boarders, attend grades 9 through 12. Hyde charges $32,000 a year in tuition, room, and board; nevertheless, the school has almost no endowment, and both its facilities and its faculty pay scale are very modest by the standards of New England prep schools. The school can afford no more than a dozen or so scholarships a year, which means that the student body is overwhelmingly white.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE HYDE SCHOOL

Founder Joe Gauld wanted to work with kids who hadn't been comfortable in the orthodox academic settings that he himself spurned.

Joe Gauld wanted to work with the kids who hadn't been comfortable in the orthodox academic settings that he himself had spurned. From the outset Hyde attracted children who, for a variety of reasons, had failed in more conventional schools. Hyde very quickly gained a reputation, which it has never shaken, as a turnaround school. The Gaulds chafe under this unsought distinction, but recognize that they are powerless to change it. For many kids, Hyde is the last stop before some terrifying tough-love, boot-camp institution socked away deep in some western wilderness (as Malcolm, strikingly, says it was for himself). An appalling fraction of the kids I talked to had drug or alcohol problems and also had parents with drug or alcohol problems—all of which they talked about with stunning candor. Hyde has no electrified fences or muscle-bound counselors. But the rules forbid everything the kids were used to back home—smoking, drinking, sex, cheating, and mistreating your fellow adolescents. Most of the kids arrive kicking and screaming.

"We're not the school the kids want to go to," as Malcolm Gauld puts it. "We're the school the *parents* want the kids to go to." Several of the kids I spoke to singled out the school's rigid schedule for special loathing: up at 6:30; breakfast at 7:30; jobs at 8; then classes, lunch, more classes, performing arts, sports, "Discovery Group"; dinner; then study hall or "Mandatory Fun." The school sometimes feels to the kids like prison on the honor code. About 40 percent of each class drops out. One senior told me that she was one of 9 kids remaining from her freshman class of 25 or 30.

But the most demanding aspect of Hyde is the Brother's Keeper code, for it is conscience, rather than fear of punishment, that is meant to guide behavior at Hyde. And each individual must act as a guardian of the conscience of others, even—and especially—if that requires a painful confrontation. This is a principle that the Gaulds bluntly call "truth over harmony." It sounds like a dreadful weapon in the hands of 15-year-olds, and in fact a teacher in Hyde's school in Washington, D.C., the Hyde Leadership Public Charter School, said that they were "trying to get away from the Jerry Springer thing." But I never witnessed an abuse of this power. I don't know how Brad, the student in the honors English class at the Bath campus, felt about being on the receiving end of the Brother's Keeper ordeal, but it was plain that the message was, We're not going to stand by and watch you fail. Many of the kids described to me the painful process of seeing themselves for the first time as others saw them. Sarah Flint was one of the small number of Hyde students who had been perfectly successful in her previous school, in Charlotte, North Carolina. (Her brothers had preceded her as students at Hyde.) "I hated it here," she said, "because they were being honest with me." Students and faculty accused her of coasting and demanded that she work harder. And, she said, she did.

Joe Gauld writes that his wife, Blanche, was an alcoholic and that he himself had abused alcohol. This painful history may account for the cult of honesty that sometimes makes life at Hyde feel like a free-floating session of Alcoholics Anonymous. Students at Hyde must tell rule breakers to turn themselves in; if that doesn't work, they have to inform the administration themselves. In the outside world, this last practice goes by the name of snitching, and it violates the adolescent code of conduct as profoundly as does the practice of confronting one's friends. Many of the kids resist this most of all; but seniors, who are given a large hand in running the

But the most demanding aspect of Hyde is the Brother's Keeper code, for it is conscience, rather than fear of punishment, that is meant to guide behavior at Hyde.

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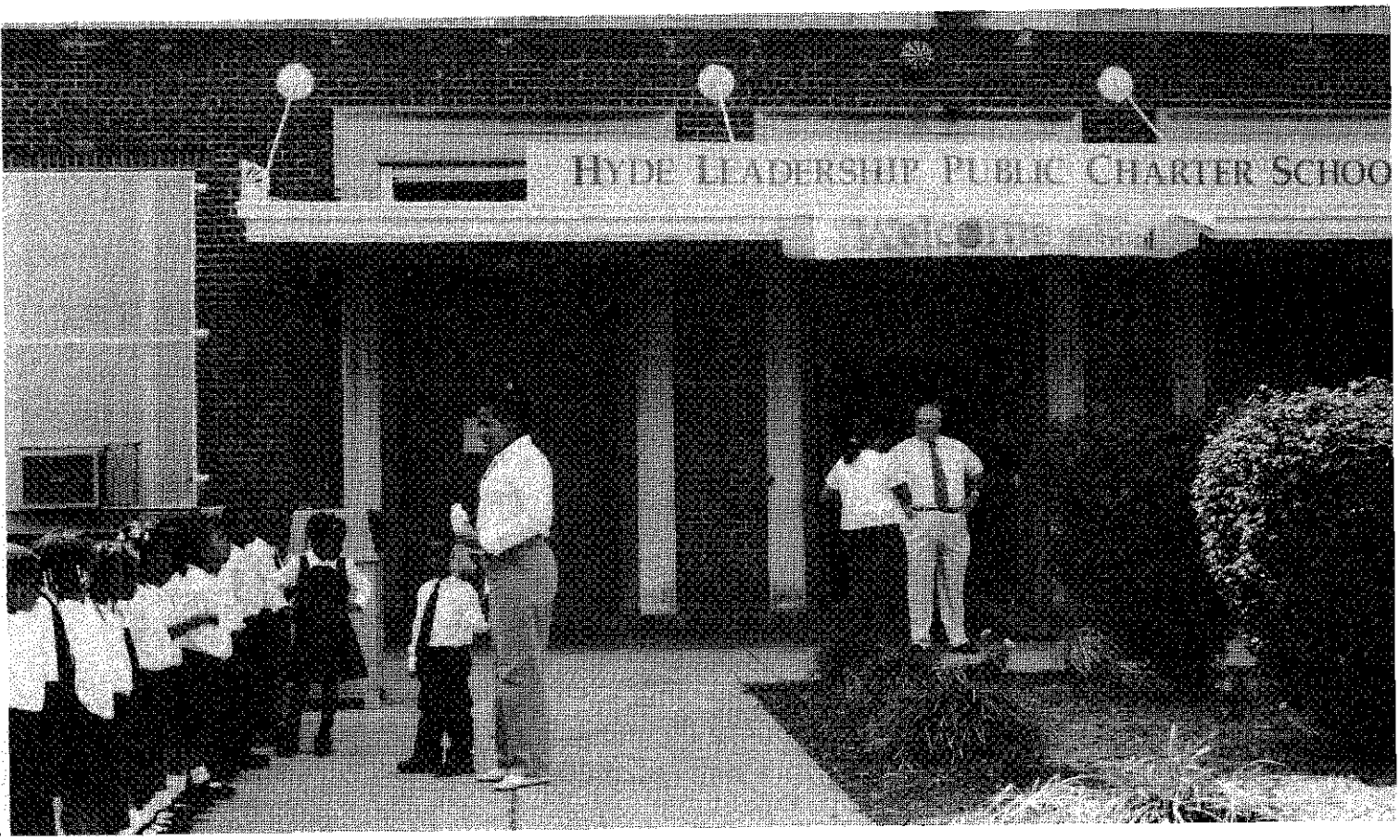

PHOTOGRAPH BY RHODA BAER

Hyde's D.C. charter school tests whether a model invented for alienated rich kids can work for the struggling poor. Most of the students arrive scoring well below grade level in reading and math.

school, are expected to fully accept this responsibility. James is an obviously bright kid who had been through a wilderness program, a "lock-down facility," and an alcoholism treatment center—and was now, he said, clean and sober. He explained, "If you report several people for an infraction, they'll stop whatever we're doing and the whole community will go down to the Pit," the outdoor auditorium. "They'll say, 'We think there's an awful lot of dishonesty going on.'" James said that the ensuing outbreak of penitence often leads students to confess absurdly trivial transgressions.

The comfort zone is the great enemy of the Hyde ethos. As innate talent is denigrated, so pressing against your limits is celebrated. Every student is required to go on wilderness trips, to engage in demanding physical activities, to play team sports, and to perform on stage. For boys who have never sung or girls who have never run—or vice versa—this can be a terrifying prospect. But of course the whole idea is to force students to find in themselves the courage to face something they never thought they could face. The Gaulds are great believers in the character-building qualities of team sports. The Hyde school in D.C. has the nation's only all-black rugby team, and the coach, Tal Bayer, told me proudly not only how well the team had fared against far more experienced opponents, but also how extravagantly they had been praised by other coaches and parents. Good character is meant to lead to good performance, just as it is supposed to produce academic excellence.

Parental Involvement

Hyde is by no means the only school that seeks to transform peer culture; that, after all, is the foundation of successful parochial schools, though the transformation they seek is of a slightly different nature. But Hyde's ambitions run deeper still. After years of meeting the parents of his students, many of them utterly blithe in the face of their own child's manifest unhappiness and apathy, Joe Gauld concluded that he could not work lasting changes in the child unless he could force the parents to undergo the same painful process of growth through self-scrutiny. Gauld is a social critic, but his sense of the world is guided less by the neo-Victorianism of today's conservatives than by a kind of New England transcendentalism—the exacting spirit of the old evangelicals. "The American family today," he writes, "is spiritually sick," obsessed with status and acquisition, deaf to the deeper registers. The lives of the children of such parents, he writes, "are empty, devoid of meaning." Gauld takes the view—and here he parts ways from much of the reform world—that even the most powerful school culture will eventually lose out to a larger, pernicious culture. As Laura Gauld, Malcolm's wife, a former Hyde student (along with her four siblings) and now the director of Hyde's Family Education Programs, puts it, "If you're not going to change the parents, you're not going to change the kids."

Hyde admits families as much as it does students. The interview process serves as an eye-opening introduction to the

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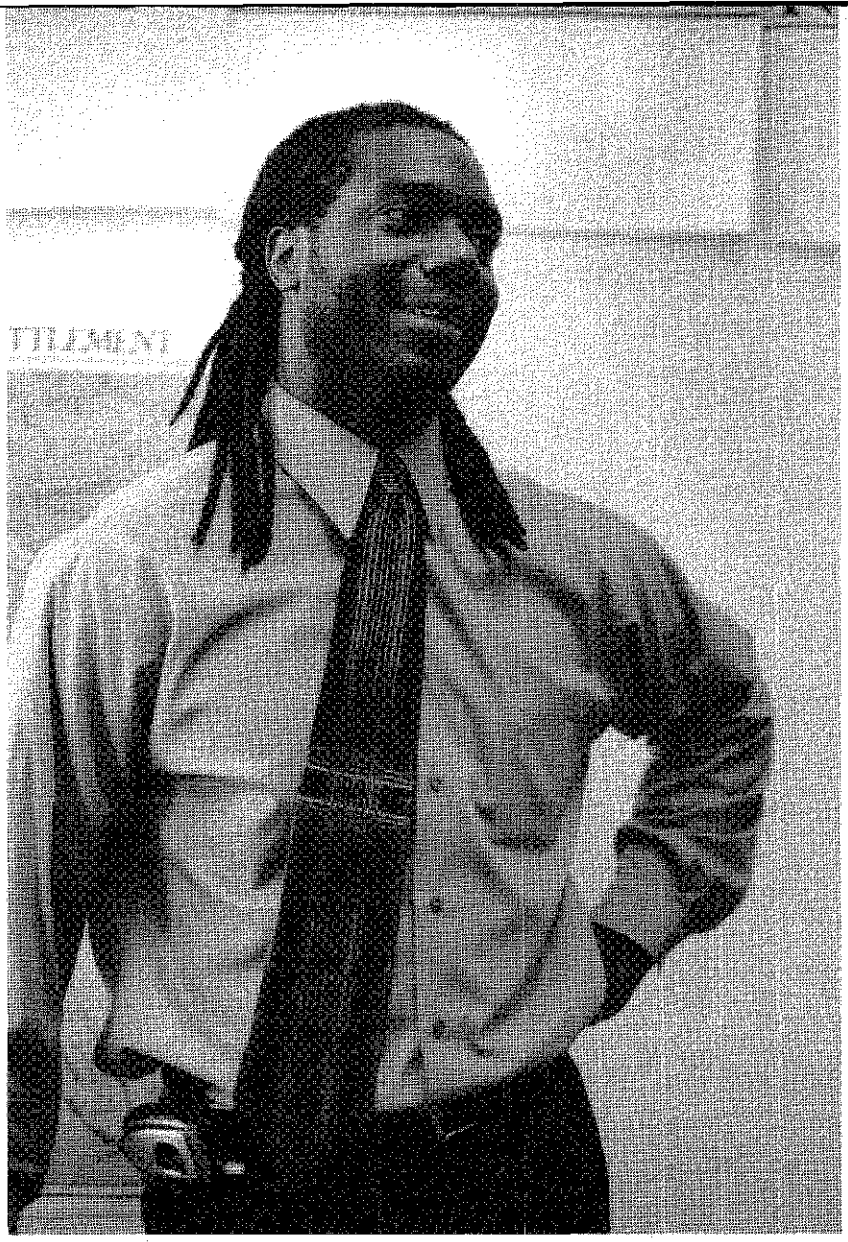
school's truth-seeking ethos. Lauren Franklin, an admissions officer (and a former Hyde student), says that she will ask the parents what "personal issues"—of theirs—they would like Hyde to address. This question flummoxes most parents, who typically take the position that while their children may have very serious problems, they don't. But since Hyde's premise is that the child's problems originate within the family, the school asks a great deal of parents, above and beyond the annual check. Parents are expected to gather for "regional meetings" at one another's homes every month, to attend family weekends at the Bath campus twice a year, and to spend three days each year at the school's Family Learning Center, also on campus. Parents spend a great many hours with one another and one another's children, even overcoming their mortification in theatrical and dance performances. The Hyde literature is full of stories of world-beating dads who finally abandon their defenses in these settings and admit to their anger, their insecurity, their alcoholism; and of families crying together in relief. Many of the kids told me that their relationship with their parents had for the first time moved beyond the superficially amicable or the ritualistically hostile.

All adults at Hyde, including the faculty, are expected to conduct themselves according to the school's dictates. Each teacher at Bath is paired with a student to talk about issues in their own life; in the D.C. school, teachers anonymously adopt a senior and correspond with him or her. The faculty in Bath has a monthly seminar in which they talk about their own progress as teachers and individuals. And at the end of the year, students gather to collectively evaluate their teachers. I attended one such session in Washington, where teachers advanced, one by one, to a folding chair set up in the front of the auditorium. Kids popped up from the audience to say "You always gave me good advice," or "I want to thank you for not giving up on me when I was in your class." The criticism tended to be mild: "You could be more patient." (It would certainly have been harsher in Bath, where the truth is usually delivered unvarnished.) One refrain I scarcely expected was, "You could be a little harder on us, especially if we're trying to take advantage of you." The kids' relationship to school authority had the character of a social contract rather than of submission to a higher power.



PHOTOGRAPH BY RHODA BAER

Teachers at the D.C. school "adopt" a senior and offer encouragement and counsel. All adults at Hyde, including faculty, are expected to follow the dictates of the Brother's Keeper.

The Hyde Truths

The Hyde experience culminates in an exercise that is, in a way, the ultimate test of character and of the virtues of the doctrine of radical truth telling. Seniors are expected to stand, one by one, before the entire class and the entire faculty and relate how they have grown at Hyde, how they have fallen short, and how they envision their future; then they propose the level of honors with which they deserve to graduate. When they are finished, everyone is invited to comment. As transparency is another incontestable virtue at Hyde, I was invited to sit in on one such session. A muscular Asian boy named Tim, a fine athlete and a sweet kid, took what is known as "the hot seat." His voice quaking, his head cast down, Tim commenced to lacerate himself for his shortcomings. "I was very afraid to look at myself," said Tim. "I would rely on my hard work and my personality." He deprecated his "people-pleasing attitude" and his "achievement-oriented attitude"—attributes that, one might think, would take him a long way in life. Tim seemed to have overdosed on the Hyde Kool-Aid. And the kids, strikingly, buoyed him up. "You're so much greater than you think you are," said one, "and everyone sees it but you." "You have to deal with your father," said another. "You have to deal with being adopted."

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He had pegged himself at the middle of the three levels of attainment, but the kids and the teachers almost unanimously agreed that he deserved the top.

It was like watching psychoanalysis practiced by a community of loving amateurs: I didn't know whether to cover my eyes or join in a group hug. I said later to Paul Hurd, an administrator who first came to Hyde in 1966, that the truth does not, after all, always set one free. He replied, "It may feel that way at the time, but it's been our experience over the years that this is what works for the kids." And the kids themselves say much the same thing. It's true that the ones I met were the survivors. But this hardy remnant talked about the school in salvific terms. Two of the kids at the Hyde Leadership School in D.C. told me that they and their friends often came to school even when there were no classes. The school is open most weekends and holidays. "We love it here," said Dawnyetta Burke, a senior. "It's our second home."

Character cannot be taught as if it were an article of knowledge. Our characters are formed by slow accretion and by innumerable adaptations to the totality of our experience.

Joe Gauld, a prophet and evangelizer in the great New England tradition, has always believed that the Hyde model is destined to replace what he sees as a dead-end academic-achievement model. So far, however, Hyde's efforts at self-replication, which Gauld has headed, have been rocky. In the early 1990s, the Hyde team tried and failed to open schools in nearby Gardiner; in Springfield, Massachusetts; and in Baltimore. In several cases, say the Gaulds, they were blocked by hostile teacher unions, since they demanded the right to hire their own faculty. Hyde now enrolls about 1,400 students at its four schools. The New Haven school is widely considered successful, but the Hyde content has drained out of it almost altogether. Only in D.C. can one test whether the Hyde model can be applied to a public school rather than to a private residential one and to a school that serves disadvantaged kids rather than financially privileged ones. Most of the seven hundred or so children who attend this K–12 institution located in a tough neighborhood in Northeast Washington enter scoring well below their grade level in reading and math; the school is overwhelmingly black and largely poor or working-class. Joanne Goubourn, the headmistress, said that she had had to scuttle certain aspects of Brother's Keeper for fear of ensuing "fights out in the street." She notes that parental involvement is much less than it is at Bath (though still significant by the standards of urban public schools). Goubourn feels that it may take another five years before the school is fully Hyde-ified.

It may be that the spiritual dedication at Bath depends on its monastic enclosure and the wounded souls there. Indeed, at times, Hyde feels almost like a cult, or at least a caste. Joe Gauld's son, Malcolm, married his former classmate Laura, whose sister Claire married Malcolm's classmate Ken, who founded Hyde's Woodstock school. Malcolm's sister Laurie married Paul Hurd; together they started Hyde's New Haven school. Another of Joe's daughters, Gigi, married another faculty member, and together *they* established the Washington, D.C., school, which Joe continues to visit at least monthly. It is as if the supreme level of engagement required to maintain the Hyde culture depends, in the end, on tribal bonds. If this is so, of course, the culture may begin to wane as soon as the institution becomes too large for the family to control. Indeed, Joanne Goubourn told me she can't quite imagine how the school would carry on without Joe Gauld.

A Gradual Soul Turning

Many theoreticians of character education recognize that character cannot be taught as if it were an article of knowledge. Our characters are formed by slow accretion and by innumerable adaptations to the totality of our experience. If school is to consciously shape this process, it will have to do so pervasively, but indirectly. As Malcolm and Laura Gauld write, "Character is inspired; it is not imparted." In *Building Character in Schools*, one of the most thoughtful works in the field, Kevin Ryan and Karen Bohlin cite Socrates' comment, recorded in Plato's *Republic*: "The instrument with which one learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body." Education, Socrates goes on, is thus an act of "gradual soul turning." This, Ryan and Bohlin remark, is the perfect metaphor for character education.

The Hyde schools are a model of gradual soul turning. They do not, for example, teach courage; instead, daily life at the school, as well as the periodic baptism-under-fire experience, is designed to foster courage. Thomas Lickona, of the Center for the Fourth and Fifth Rs, says that he believes the Brother's Keeper code has effected profound changes in Hyde's peer culture, adding that he was "deeply impressed" by

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the school in Bath and "even more impressed" by the Washington charter school. But there are other models for an all-pervasive character culture.

Karen Bohlin is now the headmistress of the Montrose School, a Catholic girls school in Natick, Massachusetts. Bohlin is also an admirer of Hyde; but she is skeptical of "radical truth telling" and says that she has not been able to bring parents as deeply into the fold as Hyde does. Montrose, she explains, was founded "in reaction to the mushy sixties stuff" and is organized around the principle of seeking truth as the goal of intellectual endeavor and a commitment to service. Since the school does not need to pierce the self-delusion of deeply troubled adolescents, as Hyde does, character education is more directly linked to intellectual development. Issues of character and leadership suffuse the daily life of the school, but always, says Bohlin, with a sense of intellectual purpose. Students might, for example, discuss the difference between character and personality or between justice and fairness.

Gradual soul turning requires a deep commitment, a deep understanding, and a deep well of patience. And while character education is bound to attract pioneers who will embrace it in full, the ordinary mortals who come in their wake will not be so zealous. Laura Gauld told me that she is often asked to visit schools professing Hyde-like principles. "Character education," she says, "means you get a group together and they come up with a set of words they want to focus on. They all agree on 'tolerance,' because tolerance is the one thing everyone can agree on."

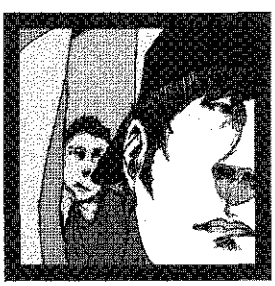
This blithe celebration of tolerance was, of course, the chief sign of the value-neutral culture that moral traditionalists vowed to upend; now it's the starting point of character education programs. This vapid, if benign, form of behavior modification can produce some immediate results. The actual goal of many of these programs, Laura Gauld says, is to reduce graffiti, bullying, and the various other outward signs of an aimless school culture. The implicit message, she says, is that character education "is going to help you clean up your act." Gauld says that so long as these obligations apply only to the kids and not to the whole adult community, and so long as "character" is understood in such narrow and utilitarian terms, the results are bound to be superficial.

The American Character

Character education has legs. It is a reform so thoroughly in the American grain, not to mention so various and adaptable, that it cannot be dismissed as just another shiny and insubstantial bubble. Moreover, the wish for schools to somehow address the sense of drift and anomie in the larger culture is not likely to abate. And so the issue is not whether we will have character education, but instead, what kind we will have and what relationship it will bear to the ongoing campaign to improve children's academic skills.

Joe Gauld founded the Hyde School in opposition to what he considered the excessively academic focus of conventional schools. Gauld has not changed his view. In an exchange of e-mail, he wrote me: "The emphasis on academic achievement is basically elitist," since "roughly 10 percent naturally respond to classroom instruction," while the other 90 percent either give up or "seek recognition elsewhere." Most education reformers would reel at this sweeping dismissal; in any case they would argue that the problem lies in the means or the content of instruction. Gauld insists that the bottom 90 percent will not succeed academically until they are reached by some other means. And he puts very little faith in schools that aim to change those odds. While he concedes that kids who go to the new crop of academically rigorous inner-city schools, like the KIPP Academy, may do better on tests than his kids, he is confident that Hyde students will be likelier to stay in college and succeed in life. Were it not so, after all, he would be forced to reexamine his central premise.

At bottom, Gauld shares that deep American fear of the soul-killing effect of academic learning that long predates John Dewey. Ralph Waldo Emerson famously expressed it when he wrote, "I had better never see a book than be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite inside of a system." Gauld is inclined to think of academic success not as the royal route out of a life of poverty and ignorance, but rather as a beguiling snare. In his e-mail he also declared that "every study done so far has found either no or an inverse relationship between grades and test scores with success and fulfillment in life." This is an astounding statement, backed up with some eccentric documentation, including a study by AT&T that apparently found that managers with high SAT



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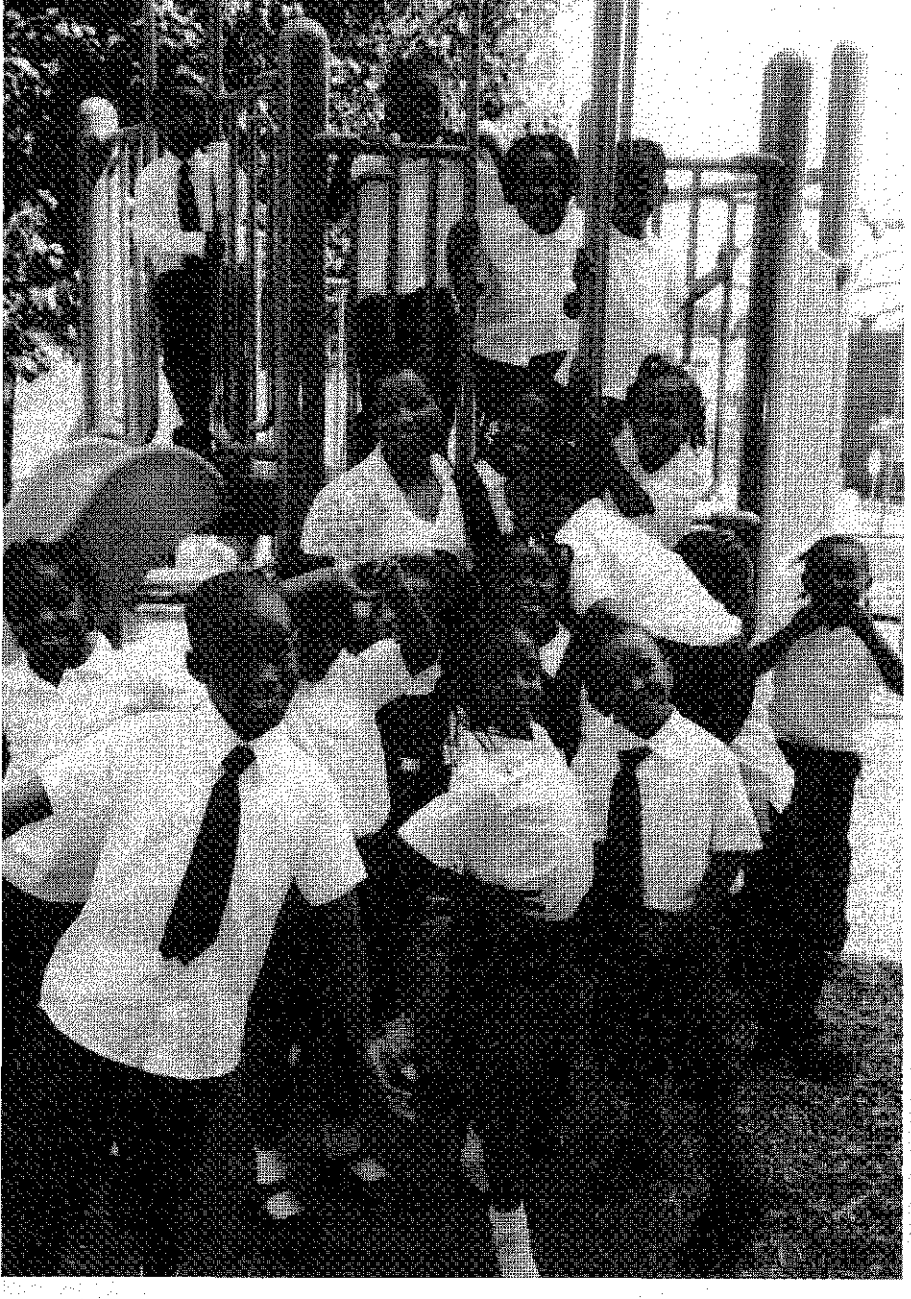

PHOTOGRAPH BY RHODA BAER

While academics takes a back seat at Hyde, Gauld believes he can infuse in young children the confidence and drive he finds lacking in many older kids.

scores "were reliably less happy and more psychologically maladjusted by their mid-adult years" than those with lower scores. Gauld also noted that Bill Gates had dropped out of college, and he observed that Thomas Edison, the Wright brothers, and Winston Churchill were "terrible students."

But I saw few signs that Hyde had discovered the key to intellectual growth. Adam, one of the seniors, said to me, "Academics kind of takes a back seat here." Classes were often adjourned in the name of some higher good—an emergency session at the Pit, for example. Both teachers and students talk about personal issues, not intellectual ones, among themselves. One reason why Hyde has trouble attracting conventionally able students is that it relegates academics to a secondary status. Only in the past few years has it introduced a series of honors classes to appeal to more academically ambitious students. And the honors English class I sat in on didn't seem terribly demanding: The students were reading four books that trimester, and they were expected to produce a standard five-paragraph essay on each as well as a final project "designed to capture your process through Hyde"—a characteristically self-referential assignment. Seniors are typically admitted to second- or third-tier colleges, though it is a point of pride that a high fraction of these students find the inner resources to graduate from college. (The same is true at Hyde's other prep school, in Woodstock, which serves a similar population.)

Rich kids with behavior problems are not, of course, the demographic for whom most school reforms are intended; poor and working-class black kids are. The success or failure of the Hyde school in Washington is thus a matter of real importance.

"We've got some high school kids who can't decode," Joanne Goubourn says. The Gaulds had no idea that children could suffer from such profound academic deficits when they opened the D.C. school in 1999, and they quickly discovered that a healthier peer culture wasn't going to improve anyone's reading comprehension. Only in the past few years has the school begun focusing intently on the teaching of basic skills, and there has been no startling progress on test scores. And yet Hyde must be doing something right: all 13 of last year's seniors graduated, enrolled in four-year colleges, and made it through the first year. And all 30 of this year's seniors are scheduled to attend four-year colleges. Hyde may have had very little effect on the kids' cognitive development, but it still had a great effect on the kind of behaviors—self-discipline, steady work habits, respect for others—that lead to success in school.

Joe Gauld says that he is now working with Craig Ramey, a founding director of the famed Abecedarian Project on early childhood development, on a school for children ages birth to five that would combine parental involvement, character formation, and cognitive development. He believes that he can infuse into little children the confidence and the drive he finds sadly lacking in so many of the older kids. One can only hope that he is right. It is, after all, widely understood that the academic gap between blacks and whites, and for that matter between whites and Asians, has a great deal to do with the expectations, habits, and values the children bring with them from home. Most schools view all that as a given; they are left, in effect, to work the margins. Hyde proposes to go to the heart of the matter.

James Traub is a contributing writer for the New York Times Magazine.
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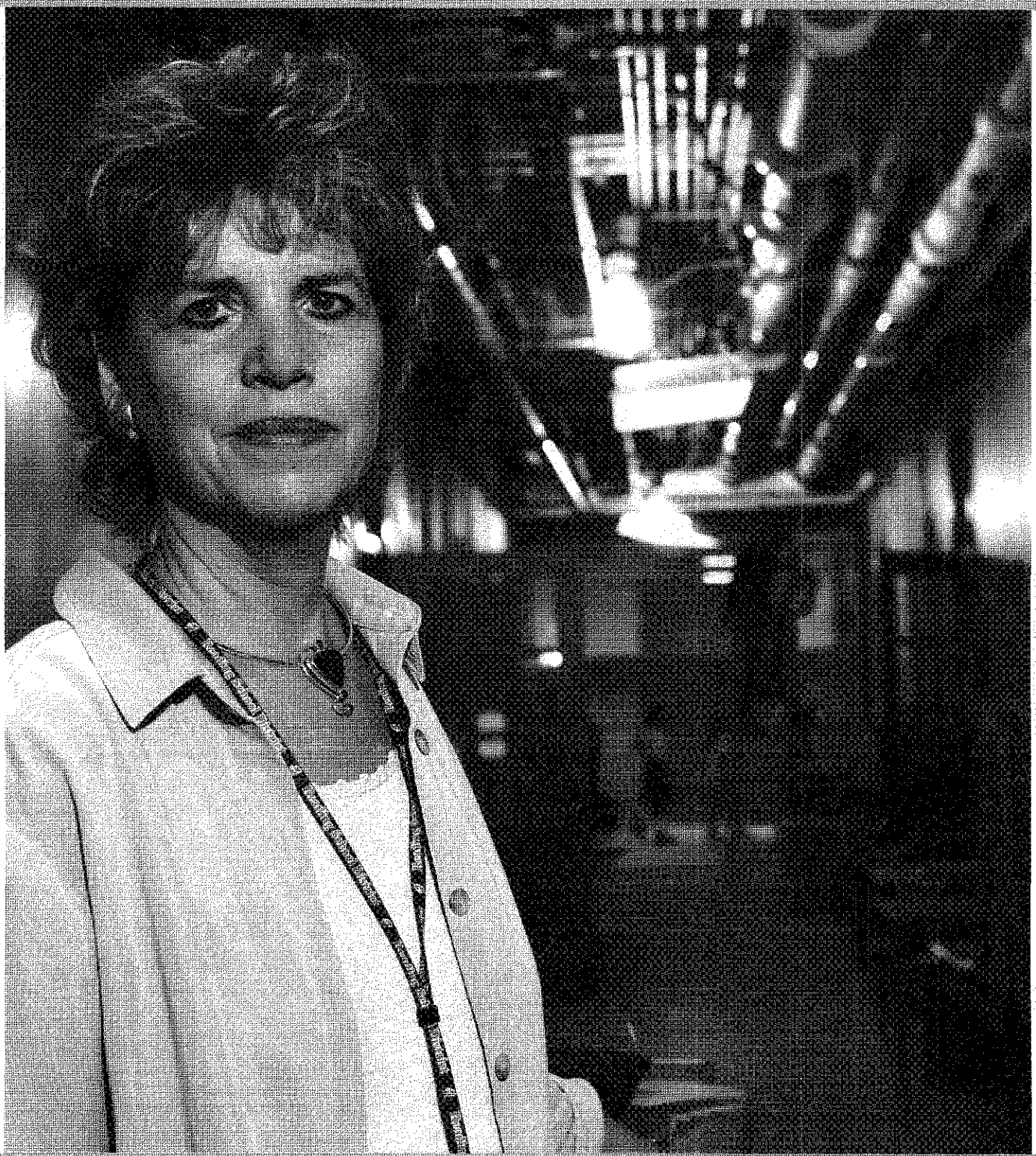

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No Child Left Behind Lawsuit Fizzles

Where Have All the Dollars Gone?

BY BRAD BUMSTED

On December 11, 2003, the Reading, Pennsylvania, School District, on behalf of "our students and our schools," said the superintendent, filed a "Petition for Review" with the Commonwealth Court of Pennsylvania. And in so filing, Reading became the first school district in the nation to sue a state education department over the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.

There were cheers throughout the land as NCLB critics predicted a flood of suits to follow. Amicus briefs were filed on Reading's behalf by the Pennsylvania State Education Association, the state's largest teacher union; the Pennsylvania School Boards Association; and the Education Law Center-Pennsylvania.

Reading School District superintendent Melissa Jamula (at left) is, by all accounts, a powerful advocate for the district with the local business community as well as local and state government leaders.

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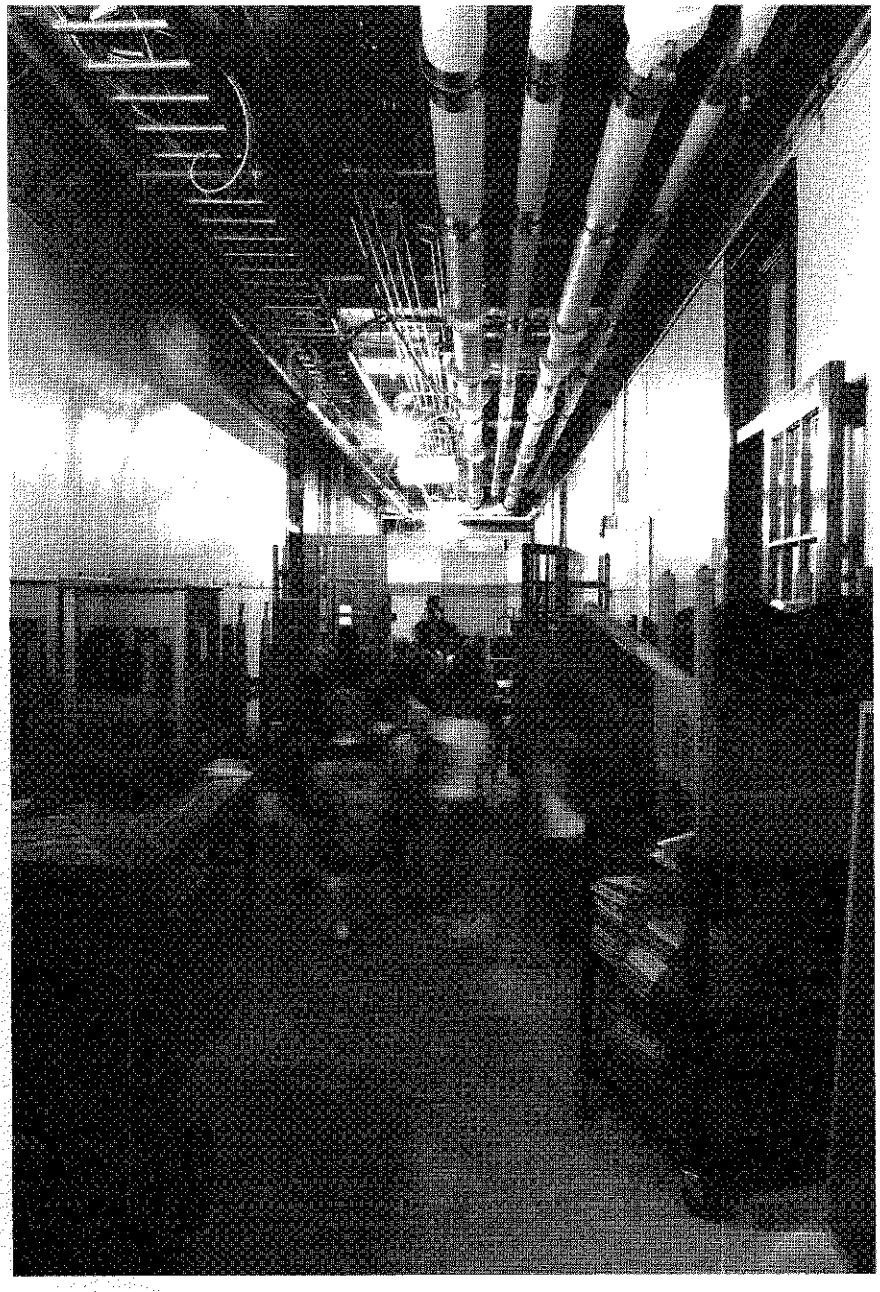

While Reading's student population had increased by 38 percent since 1990, its local property revenues dropped by 36 percent in just three years.

"I applaud Reading," Ira Weiss, special counsel for Pittsburgh Public Schools told the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette*. "I think they are confronting the reality of this program."

"A small but growing number of school systems around the country is beginning to resist the demands of President Bush's signature education law," reported the *New York Times*, which characterized Reading's complaint against NCLB as having "unreasonably required the impoverished city to offer tutoring and other services for which there is no money."

"It's certainly going to be closely watched by all observers," said Tom Hutton, a staff attorney for the National School Boards Association.

But more than six months later, as the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reported, school districts had "pulled their punches" on taking action against NCLB. And Stateline.org, an online national newspaper covering state governments, reported that a rebellion in the legislatures of more than half the states had fizzled out. Despite all the saber rattling, said Steven Smith, an education expert with the National Conference of State Legislatures, by August of 2004 "there have been no takers." The Reading district's lawsuit "is the only one I'm aware of."

Then, on August 6, eight months after Reading had filed its suit, Pennsylvania's Commonwealth Court dismissed Reading's complaint, affirming the state education department NCLB sanctions. "Essentially, the district is challenging aspects of NCLB that are within the purview of the Department's expertise and discretion," concluded Judge James Gardner Collins, "and this court will not disturb the exercise of such discretion unless it has been abused." The Pennsylvania Department of Education in a statement said it was pleased with the ruling and was hopeful Reading would accept the result.

Incredibly, within a week of the ruling and with three weeks remaining on the deadline for filing an appeal to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, the Reading School District filed a new complaint in Commonwealth Court challenging No Child Left Behind. The district's lawyer, Rick Guida, said that the new complaint was filed because more schools in the district would face NCLB sanctions in the coming year and because the district had new evidence that the federal government was inadequately—and thus, illegally—funding the new law. But as close observers noticed, many of the same issues raised in the second lawsuit had already been litigated in the first one.

Why Reading?

At first, Reading seemed like the perfect place from which to mount a challenge to the new federal law. It was one of the state's largest districts—with 16,500 students in 19 schools spread out over 9.6 square miles—and one of its most academically and demographically challenged. Some 64 percent of the student population was Hispanic, and nearly 11 percent had limited English ability. The dropout rate, 8.7 percent, was nearly four times the state average (which was 2.3 percent). The district's passing rate of 31.2 percent for the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment test was, according to the state's Education Department, "exceptionally below" the state average of 59 percent in 2002. In fact, only 1.8 percent of districts in Pennsylvania had

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a smaller proportion of test scores that met or exceeded state standards, according to an analysis by Standard & Poor's for the state Department of Education.

But Reading's real credentials as a poster child for the anti-NCLB movement derived from its fiscal problems. The district couldn't pay its regular bills, let alone pay for NCLB. In fact, the once-prosperous transportation hub in southeastern Pennsylvania, like so many rust-belt towns, seemed to be a dying community and in no position to rescue a stranded school district. The city's downward spiral included a high crime rate, businesses moving out and few moving in, and a declining tax base. Reading, population 80,000, was "in a state of shambles," said Thomas Caltagirone, one of the city's representatives to the state legislature, "on the brink of going belly up."

Increasing the local tax burden was not an option to meet the demands of NCLB, school officials complained. In fact, while Reading's student population had increased by 38 percent since 1990 (from 11,965 to 16,515), its local property revenues had dropped by 36 percent (from $39.4 million to $28.8 million) between 1997 and 2000. While the average district in the state saw its local revenue per student increase during this period, Reading's decreased (see Figure 1). By 2002 the district faced a $5 million deficit, on revenues of $103 million. "Our hat was out, we were pleading," said Caltagirone, recalling his pitch to fellow lawmakers, who agreed to bail out Reading. For 2004–05 the district's total anticipated revenue was some $127 million, 72 percent of which was provided by state and federal taxpayers. The budget, however, including debt service, was $131 million. There were "no remaining financial reserves," declared a special report of the district's Financial Empowerment Team.

It was not surprising, then, that 13 of the district's 19 schools were classified "in need of improvement" under the NCLB rubric; nor was the ensuing howl of "unfunded mandate" from local school officials unexpected. And when six of those schools were singled out for sanction for not having made "adequate yearly progress" and the other seven were put on a "warning list," with the possibility of a state takeover of the system, the district petitioned the state's Department of Education for a waiver. When the state refused to budge, Reading sued.

"The Pennsylvania Department of Education has sought to impose sanctions in one of the poorest school districts in Pennsylvania, with an inordinately large ethnic population, many of whom do not speak English," the initial lawsuit charged. "Without any assistance from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the Reading School District has no resources to implement any plan to improve student performance." It claimed that the state Department of Education had "failed to provide adequate technical assistance, including direct financial assistance"; nor did the state provide a standardized test in Spanish to allow for mandated subgroup testing.

Reading's real credentials as a poster child for the anti-NCLB movement derived from its fiscal problems. The district couldn't pay its regular bills, let alone pay for NCLB.

Though the first suit, which cited NCLB's prohibitions against imposing mandates that aren't funded, does not put a dollar figure on those mandates, outside of court, Rick Guida, the district's lawyer, claimed that "for the Reading School District to comply (with NCLB) we'd have to double or quadruple our budget." That, if the hyperbole were taken at face value, suggested that the district needed anywhere from an extra $250 million to more than $500 million just to comply with the federal law. (By the time of the August 6 suit, the number had changed considerably, with the district claiming that NCLB would cost $26.1 million.)

Money Talks

Money—or the lack of it—was red meat for the anti-NCLB forces. "Lack of sufficient resources" for "cash-strapped school districts," as the National Education Association put it in a recent press release, was one of NCLB's most troubling defects. In its amicus brief, the Pennsylvania State Education Association argued that the "sanctions under NCLB are severe and have serious implications for the financial welfare of school districts as well as rights of the school community."

The problem, though, was that real numbers, as the two Reading suits seemed to suggest, were hard to come by. (See "Exploring the Costs of Accountability," *Feature*, Spring 2004, where James Peyser and Robert Costrell wrote, "Many [NCLB] critics greatly exaggerate the shortfall of federal resources.")

"I don't know why Reading did this," said Charles Zogby, a former Pennsylvania education secretary. "Did they receive support from someone else to make this a test case? From my standpoint it seems discouraging that a district with [Reading's]

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academic challenges would put resources into what appears to be a fruitless legal effort."

"It sounds to me like a savvy local official who wants to escape accountability, signing onto this national movement to defang this law," says Robert Maranto, assistant professor of political science and public administration at Villanova University in suburban Philadelphia. Maranto, author of two upcoming works on NCLB, said, "To me the idea that they'd need a huge amount of money to bring kids up to the national average seems bogus."

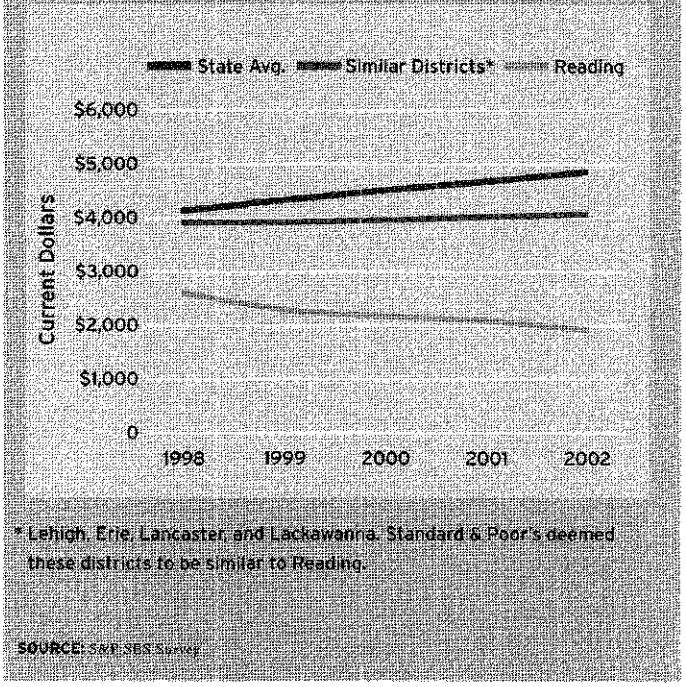
In fact, Reading School District superintendent Melissa Jamula, the daughter of a former Reading police captain, is by all accounts a powerful advocate for the district with the local business community and local and state government leaders. When the fiscal crunch hit, she launched a campaign for more state money and was largely successful in convincing community leaders that the district is doing a good job. Jamula is said to be a better politician than many of the pols.

In an e-mail alert last year announcing community meetings about the school district's problems, the superintendent wrote: "The Reading School District is facing a financial crisis that could threaten the ability to keep our schools open the entirety of next year. The reason for this crisis is because of inadequate and inequitable funding at the state level. This is NOT a problem that can be solved locally!!" The statement perhaps packed more truth than Jamula intended.

Still, while complaining about the lack of money, Reading school officials have seen the district's federal aid increased from $513 per student to $1,022 per student from 1998 through 2002, a boost of 99 percent. And while revenue from both state and federal sources increased at about the same rate as that of districts throughout the state, Reading averaged almost a thousand dollars more per student from outside sources than the state average (see Figure 2). Federal aid now represents some 12 percent of the district's revenue. Pennsylvania taxpayers, despite being sued by Reading, provide some 60 percent of the district's revenues and have bailed out the school district in each of the past two years with additional emergency funding totaling nearly $10 million. Despite the suit—or perhaps because of it—the state boosted its contributions to Reading by 12.9 percent this year. But Reading's operating costs have increased by 14.7 percent between 1998 and 2003, though most of that was during the early years of that period. During the past several years it has managed to keep its spending growth at 11 percent or less. But the district remains on life support. This year's budget also included a $3.5 million block grant from the state—a flexible funding source intended by state House Majority Leader Sam Smith, a Republican from Punxsutawney in western Pennsylvania, who helped design the concept, as a way to help school districts comply with NCLB.

Reading's Revenue in Reverse (Figure 1)

As local revenue per student in similar districts and across the state rose steadily, in Reading it declined by about 30 percent between 1998 and 2002.



* Lehigh, Erie, Lancaster, and Lackawanna. Standard & Poor's deemed these districts to be similar to Reading.

SOURCE: S&P SES Survey

Pennsylvania taxpayers, despite being sued by Reading, provide some 60 percent of the district's revenues and have bailed out the school district in each of the past two years with additional emergency funding totaling nearly $10 million.

"Without the state help we've had to date, we'd either be—or we'd be that close to being—a distressed school district [and under state control]," says Paul Roedel, a retired steel company CEO who is chairing the Empowerment Team, which has the task of formulating a five-year financial plan for the district. "That's what we're working hard to avoid for Reading." All this help is "a step in the right direction," says Roedel, "but it's not enough."

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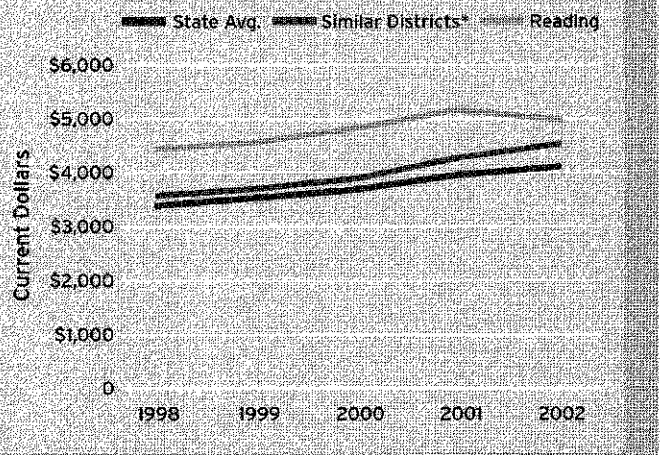
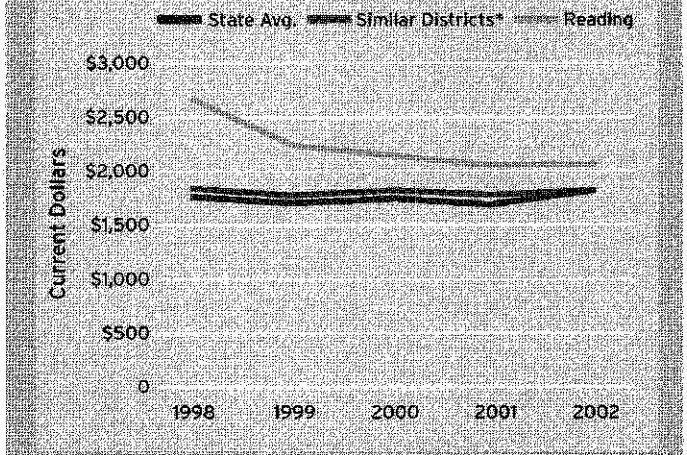
State & Federal Revenues Rise (Figure 2)
The money that Reading received from state and federal sources remained higher than the state average.



* Lehigh, Erie, Lancaster, and Lackawanna. Standard & Poor's deemed these districts to be similar to Reading.

SOURCE: S&P SES Survey

Reading Cut Its Own Taxes (Figure 3)
From 1999 to 2002, Reading's school tax on $100,000 of property decreased to a level more comparable to that of similar districts and the state average.



* Lehigh, Erie, Lancaster, and Lackawanna. Standard & Poor's deemed these districts to be similar to Reading.

SOURCE: S&P SES Survey

Where's the Beef?

Somewhere between the $26 million claimed in the August 6 suit and the extrajudicial assertion by Reading's lawyer that it could take an extra $500 million (more than $30,000 per student) to fulfill the NCLB "mandate" is the question: What is "enough"?

"Time after time the mandate charge is a generality, sadly lacking in specifics," says David Kirkpatrick, a past president of the Pennsylvania State Education Association and a pariah within the union for his advocacy of school choice. While Reading has legitimate problems, Kirkpatrick says, the "unfunded mandate" complaint is unfounded. Though the majority of Reading's funds, like those of most other districts, come from state and federal sources, Kirkpatrick argues, local districts still retain a great deal of autonomy concerning budget allocations. He points out that the $4.3 billion the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania provides for basic education statewide is "a general grant, not earmarked and [it] can be used as they see fit to meet these supposedly excessive mandates." This was the intention of the $3.5 million sent to Reading.

Eugene Hickok, Under Secretary of Education in the U.S. Department of Education, called the idea of having "to triple or quadruple their budget . . . just ludicrous." The federal law is asking districts to do what they should have been doing anyway, says Hickok, who is also a former secretary of education in Pennsylvania (and a descendent of "Wild Bill"). "This isn't meant as a hit on Reading, but what have they been spending their money on for the past 25 years?"

Though that question has not been fully explored, the line of inquiry soon began to expose the district to scrutiny it may wish it hadn't invited.

While Melissa Jamula argues that "People who say money doesn't make a difference have never spent a day in the Reading School District," those who do spend some time reviewing the district's finances would agree with Jamula—but perhaps come to a very different conclusion about the cause of the problem.

And they probably wouldn't attribute it to NCLB. In fact, the collapse of the district's financial house of cards, in 2003, came after three straight years of tax cuts by the school board. During that period Reading's property owners saw their property tax rate reduced from 22 to 16 mills. Unfortunately, despite the steep reduction, Reading's property tax rate, nearly a third higher than the state average in 1998, was still higher than the state's average in 2002 (see Figure 3). In large part due to the plummeting property tax revenues (the biggest source of local income for school districts) what had been a $7 million surplus in 1998 had become a $5 million deficit by 2003. The district had to be bailed out by the state general assembly, which also created the Empowerment Team to create a financial roadmap for the distressed district.

Ironically, while property tax cuts helped precipitate the district's fiscal plunge and the repeated cries for state money,

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the oversight board in August recommended property tax increases—a half-mill increase annually in 2005–06 and 2007–08, along with largely unspecified spending cuts; some new spending, such as upgrading the computer system; a new "welcome center" for students; and, of course, additional state aid. Altogether, the oversight board recommended $11 million in new spending and $6.8 million in cost reductions.

Buttressing the belief that Reading was skating on fiscal thin ice that had very little to do with the temperature of NCLB was a very odd fact about the district: it happened to own a world-class art museum. Founded by a former teacher in the early 1900s and expanded by a prosperous community over the years, the Reading Public Museum today includes a natural history collection and planetarium that Paul Roedel, the museum's treasurer, says is "worth millions." Its website boasts "many priceless collections."

Complicating the argument that Reading was too poor to afford NCLB was the fact that the school district owned a museum that included many valuable pieces of art.

Thus, though it shifted operations of the museum to a nonprofit foundation in 1992, one of the most disadvantaged districts in the state owns paintings by Benjamin West, Milton Avery, John Singer Sargent, George Bellows, Raphaelle Peale, Julien Dupré, Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, Edgar Degas, Henri Matisse—and dozens more.

When museum operations were shifted to the foundation, an effort was made to sell some of the assets, but "the community rose in mass against the liquidation of this community asset," explains Roedel. To sell it today would require court approval and the chance of that ever occurring is "about zero."

Though the museum collection is more of an irony than a solution to Reading's problems, it is nevertheless a potent reminder of the incongruity of a district that has benefited hugely from federal and state tax dollars crying fiscal distress—and then suing—and suing again. "They'd rather have something to complain about and make excuses instead of dealing with their problems," says Matthew Brouillette, president of the Commonwealth Foundation, a Harrisburg-based policy center. Brouillette is no fan of NCLB, but his complaint centers on states-rights issues. He has little sympathy for Reading's financial plight. "It's never enough," he says.

The Solution—Not the Problem

"No one is denying," says Charles Zogby, "that these districts, Reading in particular, don't face challenges. They do. But what we had here was a system that didn't measure performance. Now we have one that does."

It's that measurement, together with the threat of censure, that many observers believe is the real complaint of the Reading School District. NCLB "is pushing school districts to do things out of their comfort zones," says Robert Maranto, who last year surveyed state education officials throughout the country about NCLB. Maranto reports that state officials see NCLB as a way of saying "shape up" to the districts getting state aid. "The local officials [who are] being held accountable hate it," Maranto says. "Superintendents hate it. Teachers hate it. School boards hate it."

It may mean that some schools will be "labeled a failure—and nobody likes that," Maranto continues. Wealthy suburban districts in particular can't fathom the thought of having a school that is failing to meet adequate yearly progress, he says.

But in most states local districts have a great deal of autonomy. And while some of the criticism of NCLB has come from high-performing districts that find the new federal regulations a nuisance, much of the complaining has come from low-performing districts like Reading that have been caught in the headlights. The myriad of social and fiscal problems faced by the district existed long before the enactment of NCLB.

In fact, Reading's suit might just prove that NCLB is doing exactly what it is supposed to be doing: exposing struggling districts to standards of excellence they had never even imagined. And what was first considered to be the perfect district to illuminate NCLB's defects has turned out to be a shining example of why NCLB was needed.

Brad Bumsted covers the state capitol in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, for the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review. *He is the coauthor of* Murder Is the Charge, *a nonfiction work about a former York, Pennsylvania, mayor.*

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Retaining Retention

How Chicago changed—but ultimately saved—its controversial program to end social promotion

BY ALEXANDER RUSSO

In a remarkable confluence of events last winter and spring, questions about student retention became the swirling center of education debate in New York City, Chicago, and, by virtue of these cities' size and clout, throughout the country.

In New York, Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced in January that city schools would no longer pass 3rd graders on to the next grade if they had not mastered minimal reading skills on an hour-long reading test. Civil-rights and community activists were opposed, and they threatened to sue to block the plan. The district's decision to hire teachers for summer school—part of the retention plan—outside of union hiring rules created another furor. And some parents and community members protested the new initiative as too harsh.

While New York churned, Chicago, where a pioneering student retention policy had been in effect since 1997, was hit in April by two studies from the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR), a nonprofit group affiliated with the University of Chicago. The studies suggested, with seeming definitiveness, that ending social promotion was ineffective, at best, and possibly destructive.

"We should scrap what we're doing and go back to the drawing board," University of Chicago professor Melissa Roderick, one of the lead CCSR researchers, told the Associated Press, in a story reprinted around the country.

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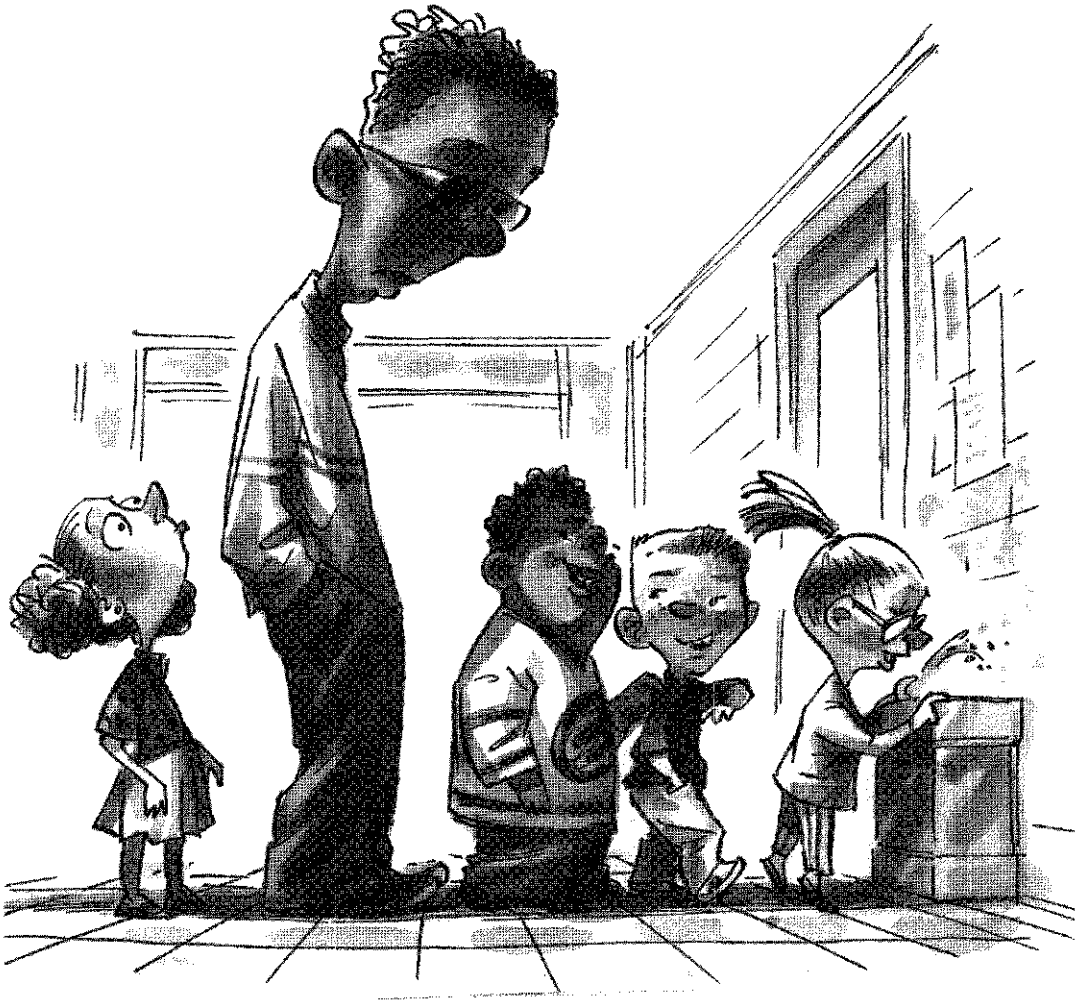

Roderick's message in the CCSR press release accompanying the report itself was somewhat more nuanced: "The bottom line is that, without substantial supports, neither social promotion nor retention will improve low-performing students." But this qualification was apparently lost on newspaper editors, who reprinted the story under headlines like, "Social promotion fight didn't help in Chicago" and "Program to curtail 'social promotion' fails."

The media also largely ignored other CCSR studies that had indicated that Chicago's retention policy was popular among the city's teachers, principals, and parents for, among other things, setting clear standards for student performance (see "Educators and Students Speak," page 49). Nor did the media consider whether the retention policy had contributed to the dramatic overall achievement gains seen in Chicago since the policy's adoption.

In New York, the critical CCSR studies helped fuel opposition to the new retention program. Mayor Bloomberg had to remove two of his own appointees from the school governing board, a move that brought widespread criticism, in order to ensure adoption. And even before the program was fully implemented, the district was forced to add an extensive appeals process.

Ending social promotion, one of several lightning rod issues that bring parents, union leaders, politicians, and academics together—to fight—is not a task for the faint of heart.

The Chicago Board of Education, also responding to the new CCSR reports, immediately modified its student retention program by dropping math scores as a consideration in retention decisions. That move, seeming to herald the end of one of Mayor Richard Daley's signature school reform initiatives, was labeled by the *Chicago Tribune* as "the social promotion surrender."

Staying Power

Despite the controversy—and the retreats—the programs have survived. But the events of last winter and spring illustrate the roller-coaster ride that awaits any school district that tries to tamper with a core education policy like student retention. Student retention, one of several lightning rod issues that bring parents, union leaders, politicians, and academics together—to fight—is not a task for the faint of heart.

It's thus fitting that the city of broad shoulders, guided by a mayor named Daley, should lead the way. Chicago's pioneering program is now in its eighth year, having withstood its share of icy gusts from multiple directions. For those who have been paying close attention, the brawl that broke out last spring was just the latest in a rolling clamor to control one of education's linchpin topics. The stakes are high; the questions, many and complicated.

Does retention work? For whom? How do you justify a program that may benefit a school district overall, but also presents potentially life-altering challenges to individual students who are flunked? How do you measure its success? What do you do with students who are held back? How do you pay for it? And, if the policy does work, shouldn't you see an eventual reduction in retention rates?

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To be sure, Chicago is not the only district that retains students. Over the decades, the practice of holding students back has waxed and waned in the American school system. Recent studies have found that roughly 15 percent of students repeat a grade between kindergarten and graduation. Such student retention seems politically popular, having been endorsed by the past two presidents.

But Chicago's program may be the nation's largest sustained effort by a major school district to end social promotion. It provides an intriguing and revealing view of the multiple issues that confront school systems that seek to change a well-entrenched policy—what it takes to endure and when it is time to change course.

In the Beginning

In the spring of 1995, the Chicago Public School system, the nation's third largest and, arguably, one of the most troubled, made national headlines when it was taken over by Mayor Daley, then starting his third term and the most popular mayor since his father, Richard J. Daley, held the office for 21 years. With the new powers granted by the Illinois legislature, Daley *fils* quickly formed a new school management team, which, just as quickly, unveiled what one local paper called "a dizzying array of new programs," including principal training, longer school days, expanded preschool, college classes for the gifted, hiring of parents as truant officers, and alternative schools for dropouts.

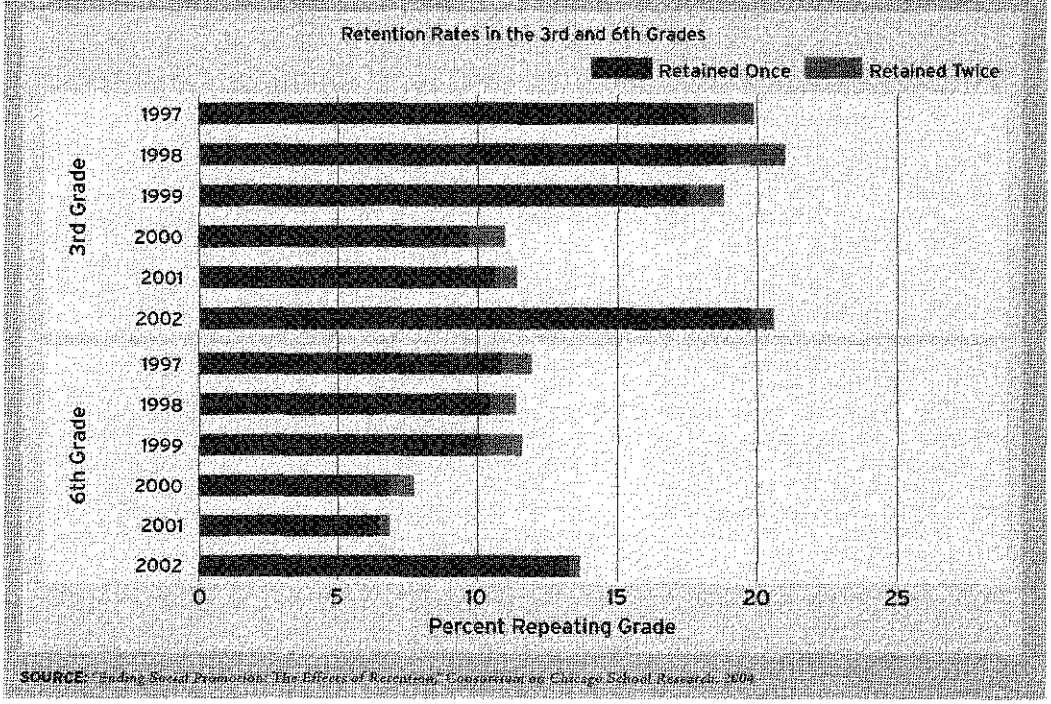
But by far the biggest reform introduced by Daley and Paul Vallas, chief executive officer of the Chicago Public Schools from 1995 to 2001, was the education equivalent of *just say no*: ending the practice of social promotion. The new policy required Chicago's lowest-performing third-, sixth-, and eighth-grade public school students to attend summer school and possibly repeat a grade at least once if they did not meet minimum reading and math test-score cutoffs on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS). This shift toward greater accountability also included putting "low performing" schools, those in which fewer than 15 percent of elementary students met national norms in reading, on an academic watch list. What had been whispered in policy reform circles for years and tested in small public school districts and pockets of reform around the country was now policy in a major city school system. Suddenly 412,921 students in 475 elementary schools—specifically, children in grades three, six, and eight—were to have the progressive rug pulled out from under them.

It was an ambitious accountability agenda, and in the years that followed the policy's implementation, test scores among Chicago's lowest-achieving students rose, particularly in the upper grades, while the proportion of schools with extremely low performance fell. The improved scores were impressive enough to lead several states and other major school districts, including New York, to adopt elements of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) policy—making student progress toward the next grade dependent on demonstrated achievement on standardized tests. President Bill Clinton visited a Chicago school in 1997, proclaiming, "I want what is happening in Chicago to happen all over America."

Since 1997, the policy has resulted in thousands of Chicago's elementary students being required to go to summer school and being held back every year. Not counting special-education and limited-English-proficient students, from 6.8 to over 20 percent of students have been held back each year, with a peak of nearly 15,000 students retained in 1998 (see Figure 1).

Held Back (Figure 1)

Each year a large percentage of CPS students are asked to repeat 3rd and 6th grades.



SOURCE: "Ending Social Promotion: The Effects of Retention," Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2004

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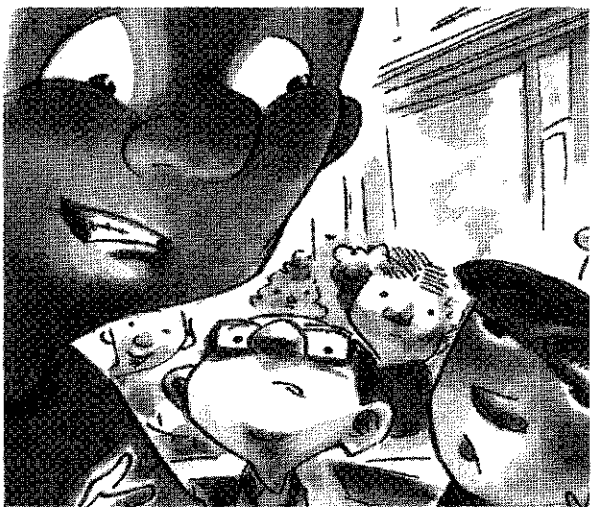
A Little Success Goes a Long Way

Despite these large numbers—which indicate a huge systemic change—and despite the long-standing practice of social promotion in public schools, the rationale for holding students back seemed readily apparent to many parents. According to a 2000 Public Agenda survey, more than two-thirds of all parents nationwide supported retention even if it meant that their child would be held back.

One reason for the popularity of the retention policy in Chicago—aside from the advantages of having a popular mayor to promote it—was the strong and relatively steady improvement in the Chicago schools. Over the past eight years, the dropout rate has decreased from 16 percent to 13 percent. The percentage of elementary students meeting national norms on the ITBS in reading has increased from 36.9 to 43 percent. The percentage of students testing in the bottom quarter of the ITBS has dropped from 32 percent to 24.4—better than the nation as a whole, according to CPS officials.

In fact, even while things were looking bad last spring, a new study by Brian Jacob of Harvard and Lars Lefgren of Brigham Young provided more evidence to support the proponents of Chicago's retention program. Jacob and Lefgren examined the records of some 148,000 students in Chicago's third and sixth grades for 1997–1999, comparing students who had just passed the retention cutoff test with those who had just failed it. The two groups were virtually identical except that the latter was required to attend summer school and faced retention. The study revealed that the policy resulted in substantial academic improvement among the third graders who faced retention. The effect was insignificant for sixth graders.



"Our results indicate the achievement gains that are possible with remedial education," said Jacob in a press release issued at the time, seeming to buttress Roderick's hedge about the need for "substantial supports." "It is obviously important to track the longer-run impacts of these programs. However, in the quest for higher standards and achievement, these programs may offer some hope for students struggling to meet the bar."

An Easy Target

The Jacob/Lefgren study, however, did not receive nearly the attention of the one-two punch effect created by the negative CCSR studies and New York's controversial unveiling of its new retention policy. And it surely did not quiet the critics, who continued to complain that children are too young to be penalized for reading struggles, that retention has a potentially negative effect on children's love of learning, and that the stigma attached to being held back while the rest of your classmates move on is not worth it. The policy could still be cast as an ineffective, politically motivated, and discriminatory approach to school reform: an easy target.

The policy was the subject of a civil-rights lawsuit filed in 1999 by a group called Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE). Retention opponents like Don Moore, executive director of the education reform organization Designs for Change, frequently criticized the policy for being a misuse of standardized test scores that simply overidentified poor and minority children for retention. (The PURE suit was settled in 2001 and resulted in modifications of the policy to take other, behavioral, factors into account and to adopt an appeals procedure.)

In truth, the policy had some glaring flaws: among them, multiple retentions for some students, an undisclosed and ill-defined waiver program that allowed thousands of students to go on to the next grade despite not meeting the official standards during the first three years, late or even last-minute notification about retention decisions, and an inconsistently implemented appeals process. In addition, it wasn't particularly well aligned with the district's other main accountability program, school probation, which focused on second-quartile students rather than the lowest-performing students in a school.

Financially, the reality is that reeducating 10,000 students a year, at roughly $8,400 per pupil, costs no small chunk of change. Districts often ratchet back on retaining students during tight economic times, and, though it was once flush with cash, the Chicago school system faces an ever-growing budget gap. Business support began to show signs of waning even before the pessimistic CCSR studies. *Left Behind*, a scathing 2003 report by the business-led Civic Committee of Chicago concluded that Chicago's school reform efforts had failed to raise student achievement sufficiently and that a new effort at reform was needed.

Not surprisingly, positive media coverage of the school system began to slide. Though the *Tribune* remained a strong supporter of the retention policy, in 2003 the *Chicago Sun Times* published a two-part series, "The Daley Generation," that criticized it. Roughly 100,000 students had been held back since the program began in 1997, the paper reported. It said that more than a quarter of the 36,000 students who entered first grade

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the year Daley took over the schools in 1995 had been held back at least once. The paper suggested that if the program were working and the system improving, those numbers should be decreasing and more middle-income parents would be sending their children to Chicago public schools. They weren't.

Often too little happened when a student was held back. In theory, retained students were supposed to participate in an enriched, accelerated academic program that would, through additional help and tailor-made interventions, result in a better outcome at the end of the repeated grade or even help the student catch up to his or her classmates. Despite the apparent success of the Summer Bridge program, the school system failed repeatedly to come up with additional supports and adjustments for students who were held back. Efforts to get those support and remediation programs up and running were plagued with problems and never fully implemented. In reality, most retained students simply repeated the previous grade level.

In the meantime, the increases in test scores slowed.

The Devil in the Details

When the two critical CCSR studies were released, the timing couldn't have been worse for the proponents of retention. On top of what seemed a run of desultory news, the University of Chicago researchers reported that, over a period of two years, third graders who were retained did just as poorly as similarly low-performing third graders who weren't held back. Retained sixth graders did worse than their counterparts who were not held back. And retained eighth graders were far more likely to drop out and at a younger age. In fact, 78 percent of the students retained in 8th grade had dropped out by the time they turned 19.

Though longtime supporters of stronger accountability were quick to express their dismay at what seemed to be the school board's even quicker abandonment of the math component of the retention standard, the *Tribune*'s "surrender" editorial predicted what was likely to happen. "Slowly returning to social promotion relieves the pressure on teachers, parents, and students, but ultimately devalues the diploma the kids receive."

All but unnoticed at the time, however, were the CCSR studies that had found benefits in the retention program, as well as the Jacob/Lefgren research, which seemed to dispute some of the substantive negative findings, at least as they applied to the effect of retention on third graders.

None of the studies, though, attempted to measure fully the impact of the policy on students who might have been motivated to work harder to avoid being held back, or on teachers and schools; nor did they parse the effect of student retention on overall system performance.

As some observers have noted, student retention policies are not really about the students who are retained as much as they are about the way the rest of the school system operates when it knows that there is no social promotion. Researchers like G. Alfred Hess, an education professor at Northwestern University, are quick to point out that the justifications for retaining students should not be based solely on their impact on retained students, but rather on the effect of the threat of retention on all students and their families. "This dual intent for ending the social promotion policy is frequently ignored by its opponents and is rarely considered in evaluating the effectiveness of the policy," Hess writes in *School Reform in Chicago* (2004).

The justifications for retaining students should not be based solely on their impact on retained students, but rather on the effect of the threat of retention on all students and their families.

The News Left Behind

Finally, though, a deficiency of the CCSR studies was that they focused on the early years of the retention policy and thus failed to take into account more recent modifications to the program. In fact, a crucial omission in the press coverage of the retention program was just that: the many adjustments to the policy. And a closer look at the 2004 changes suggests that they were actually just the latest in a long series of alterations that have been made over the years, some to strengthen the program, others to soften it.

Minimum test-score requirements have changed a number of times. As initially implemented, the policy affected primarily those who were a year below national norms in 3rd grade, or a year and a half below norms in 6th and 8th grades. The promotion requirements were steadily ratcheted up during the first three years (1997–1999), but eventually were turned into "bands" around minimum test scores.

The waivers process through which students could pass along to the next grade without meeting test score cutoffs was fleshed out in 2000, formalizing procedures through which classroom grades, attendance, and teachers' recommendations could be factored into retention decisions. (Researchers found that some parts of the city were giving more waivers than others, and the total number of waivers was more than reported.)

Classroom behavior, grades, and attendance were all given a more prominent role in the retention decision, and an appeals

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process was, in theory at least, implemented for parents who wanted to dispute a retention decision—in part the result of an agreement with the U.S. Office for Civil Rights that was brought on by the 1999 PURE lawsuit.

In 2003, the board informally adopted most of the changes codified in 2004, including the focus on reading, but not math scores. Dropping math was not only not new, it may have been less of a change than it seemed. "Math was never a big factor," says Jenny Nagaoka, one of the Consortium report's coauthors. "For the most part, kids ended up being retained because of reading."

The changes made by the Board of Education last spring were neither as new as many thought nor as substantial as they may have seemed at first glance.

In September of 2004, as school opened, Chicago officials announced that fewer students—just under 8,000—would be retained. Was it surrender, retreat, or victory? Did it mean that ending social promotion was working or that the strict retention policies that were the program's hallmark in 1996 had been abandoned?

In the end, the changes made by the Board of Education last spring were neither as new as many thought nor as substantial as they may have seemed at first glance. About this, close observers, both critics and supporters of student retention, seem to agree. According to a May cover story in *Catalyst*, the Chicago magazine that covers education issues, the board merely "tapped the brakes" in response to the latest research findings. The new policy is "not likely to reduce significantly the number of students who are retained," says Don Moore, who described the policy change as "mere tinkering."

Even Jenny Nagaoka said that while the Board of Education had implemented most of the CCSR's recommendations "beautifully" in regard to preventing the need for retention, it had not backed off on retention itself. "They took all our recommendations but the biggest one," she said.

Getting the Story Straight

Senior officials in Chicago themselves contributed to some of the confusion about the changes to the retention policy. In the same week, for example, Arne Duncan, who had taken over from Paul Vallas in June of 2001, described the changes as "fine-tuning," while his chief education officer, Barbara Eason-Watkins, said the new policy was "intended to dramatically reduce the number of students who must be retained." And the announced enhancements, which included kindergarten literacy assessments, full-day kindergarten, smaller class sizes, keeping teachers and students together during the early grades, and individualized learning plans for students at risk of being held back, gave no indication of how dramatic the changes were. Another change: summer school would be required for at-risk students as well as those faced with retention.

Whatever the causes—and however they were characterized—one result of the policy shift was that few people were aware of the existence of the other studies, of the overall progress made in Chicago schools over the past decade, or of the fact that teachers and principals think the policy is working and that kids report that teachers and parents are helping them out more.

In the meantime, more recent policy initiatives—such as Mayor Daley's new "Renaissance 2010" plan, announced last summer, to close 60 low-performing schools and in their place create 100 new small schools, many of them charter and contract schools without union teachers or local school councils—seem to have replaced student retention as a focus of community concern and opposition.

Back in New York City, the first year of the Big Apple's retention program seemed to have gone smoothly. In contrast to previous attempts at mandatory summer school, most students showed up for class in the summer of 2004. And more than 40 percent of the students who had failed their reading tests passed after going to the beefed-up, $32 million summer school program, more than doubling the previous year's rate of 19 percent. Thus, somewhat ironically, the overall number of retained students was about 3,600, just 500 higher than the year before, when there was no revolutionary retention policy. Not surprisingly, in September, Mayor Bloomberg announced that the retention program would in the future include 5th grade as well as 3rd grade.

"By now it's a familiar pas de deux in the public schools," wrote *New York* magazine columnist Robert Kolker about the early months of retention and the relatively small actual impact on retention figures.

Alfred Hess writes that ending social promotion may have been "neither as destructive as some opponents predicted nor as miraculous as Vallas and others hoped." In both Chicago and New York, however, what remains unknown is whether the school systems will do any better by the retained students than they have in the past—thereby eliminating one of the chief remaining arguments against retention.

Alexander Russo is a freelance education writer based in Chicago. He is the editor of School Reform in Chicago: Lessons in Policy and Practice *and author of the weekly Internet newsletter "This Week in Education."*

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feature

Educators AND Students SPEAK

Those Closest to the Action Like the Retention Policy

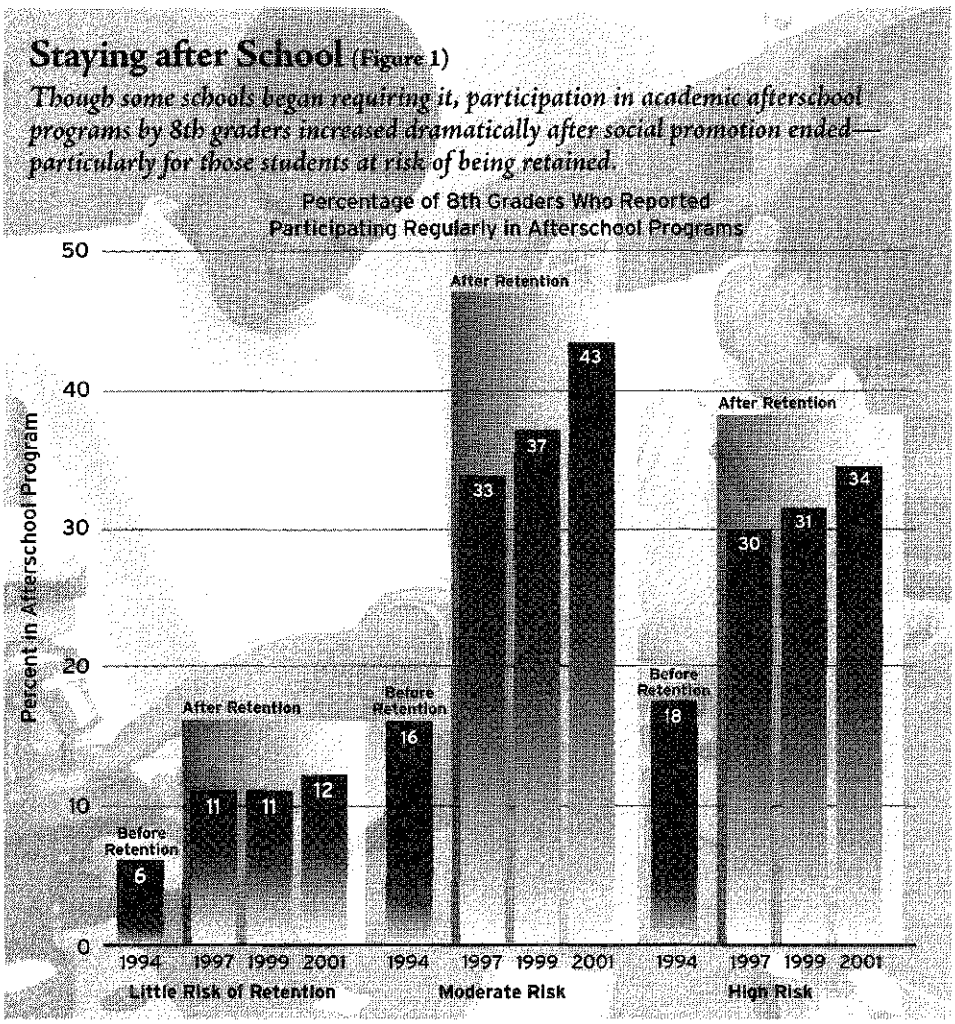
BY ROBIN TEPPER JACOB AND SUSAN STONE

Despite mixed reviews from many educators—and some researchers—Chicago's policy to end social promotion has turned out to be a popular program. Surprisingly, perhaps, its most avid fans are the people most affected by it: teachers and students. The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR), an independent research group founded in 1990, has asked many questions about this pioneering education reform. Among them: Does retention improve academic outcomes? What are untoward—and unforeseen—side effects? Did it contribute to test-score gains? Did high-stakes testing policies produce only one-time impacts on behavior or are there long-term impacts? One of the more interesting questions the CCSR asked was, Did high-stakes accountability cause the teachers, parents, and students of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to change their behavior in ways that would lead to higher achievement, or does the evidence suggest that the CPS's initiatives resulted in simply more focus on testing?

Chicago's ending of social promotion was intended to make educators pay more attention to the lowest-performing students, encourage parents to become more involved in their children's education, and send strong messages to students that achievement mattered. However, opponents of high-stakes testing worried that if students with low skills felt that promotional test cutoffs were out of their reach and that they could not do well on standardized tests based on their past experience, they might react to the pressure of high-stakes testing by becoming less engaged with school (But see Figure 1).

Staying after School (Figure 1)

Though some schools began requiring it, participation in academic afterschool programs by 8th graders increased dramatically after social promotion ended—particularly for those students at risk of being retained.



SOURCE: Consortium on Chicago School Research

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN BOOZ, CHARTS BY BRUCE SANDERS

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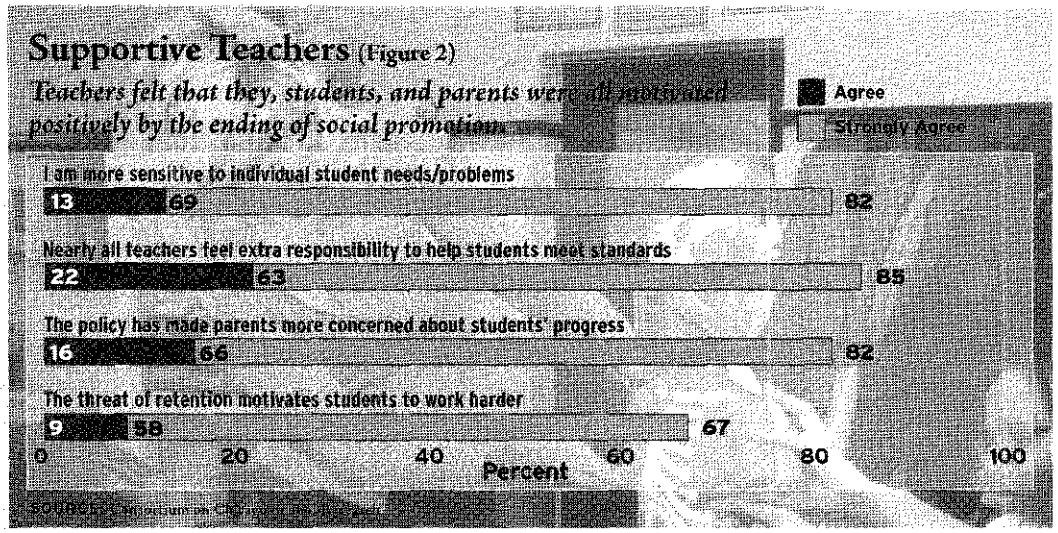

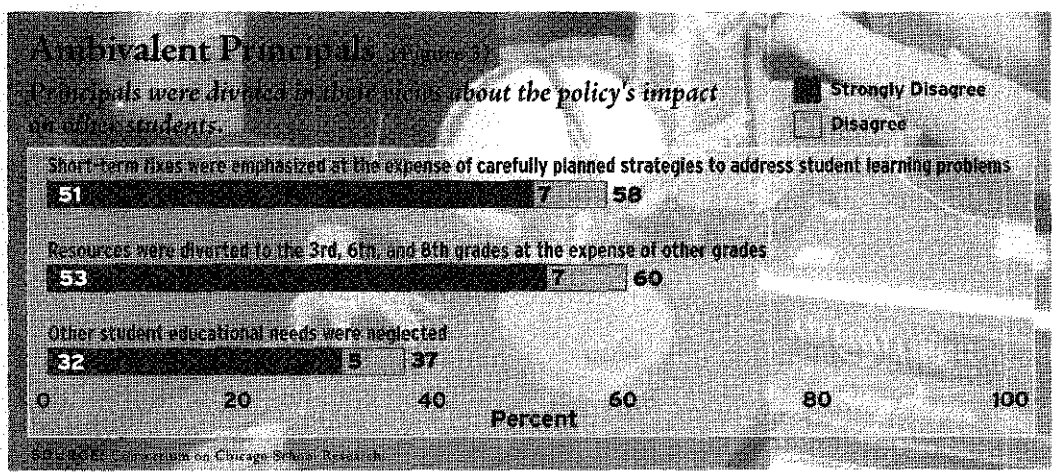

The Study

Fortunately, the Chicago experiment—now in its eighth year—became part of an ongoing study of the city's public school system begun by the CCSR in 1994. Since 1999 the CCSR has published several studies of Chicago's attempt to end social promotion that help to provide an extensive, empirical, and longitudinal look at the impact of the high-stakes testing policies on the Chicago school system. This article is adapted from one of those reports, "Ending Social Promotion: Response of Students and Teachers" (February 2004, CCSR).

Our study drew on four basic sources of data: teacher surveys, principal surveys, student surveys, and personal interviews with a sample of teachers from five low-performing schools. The CCSR began its comprehensive biannual survey of Chicago schools two years before the policy to end social promotion was introduced, polling all CPS teachers, principals, and students in 6th, 8th, and 10th grades about a range of education-related topics, including time spent on test-preparation activities, the content of reading and mathematics instruction, and students' experiences in the classroom. In 1999 and 2001 survey questions were added asking teachers and principals specifically about the new social promotion policy. While no survey data were collected about social promotion per se before 1999, the biannual survey begun in 1994 served to monitor changes in teachers' reports of their teaching behavior and students' reports of their classroom experiences before and after the program was rolled out.

Of the 16,895 elementary school teachers in the system, 7,900, about 47 percent, responded to the survey in 1999 (see Figure 2). In addition, some 315 of 450 principals responded to the 1999 survey (see Figure 3); 30,000 students (about 50 percent of all 6th and 8th graders) also responded. Response rates in 1994, 1997, and 2001 were similar. There was no evidence of response bias at the school level: the proportion of respondent teachers in low-income, minority, and low-performing schools was the same as in the entire CPS system.

In addition to the survey data collected, in-depth interviews were conducted with 43 teachers who taught in the promotion-gate grades (3rd, 6th, and 8th, where students faced their test-score Rubicons) at five K–8 schools in the system. These five schools were located in neighborhoods with some of the highest retention rates in the city (after the promotion policy took effect), and they had large percentages of minority and poor students.

The interviews with teachers were especially valuable in providing insight into how, exactly, teachers spent their time "preparing" for the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS). Half of the teachers, for instance, said they had aligned the content of their curriculum with the content of the test, but only 4 percent included curriculum content in what they considered "test preparation."

Overall, though our study confirms some of the fears expressed by opponents of the program (see "Retaining Retention," page 42), the student and teacher survey responses and personal interviews also suggest that Chicago's bold experiment had a positive impact. Although time spent on test preparation increased substantially after the institution of high-stakes accountability, it declined in subsequent years. Teachers shifted instructional emphases in reading and math, increasing student exposure to grade-level material, and devoted more time to reading skills relevant to the test. And low-achieving 6th- and 8th-grade students received greater academic support and reported greater academic engagement.

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What Was the Policy?

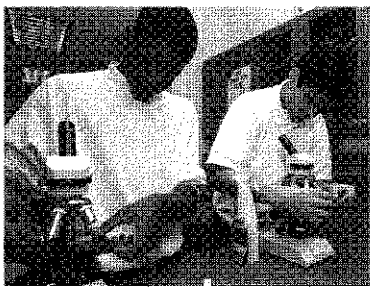
From the beginning, the centerpiece of Chicago's high-stakes testing program for students was a set of minimum test-score standards on the reading and mathematics sections of the ITBS for students in the 3rd, 6th, and 8th grades. Students who did not meet the test-score cutoffs at the end of the school year were required to participate in a special summer program, called Summer Bridge, and to retake the test in August. Those who again failed to meet minimum test scores were retained in their grade or, if they were 15 years or older, were sent to alternative schools. In the first several years under the policy, more than one-third of all 3rd, 6th, and 8th graders failed to meet the promotion test-score cutoffs by the end of the school year. Though the result varied by grade and year, the summer program succeeded in cutting the test failure rate by a third.

Beginning in the 2000–2001 school year, the district began using a range of variables around the promotion cutoff to make promotion decisions; recommendations from teachers and principals, for example, were then incorporated into the promotion decisions. Our study, however, focuses on the impact of the CPS's policy before these 2000–2001 policy changes. In the first several years of the policy, the CPS retained 20 percent of eligible 3rd graders and approximately 10 percent of 6th- and 8th-grade students—compared with an almost negligible retention rate before the ending of social promotion.

During this same period a system of school accountability was also implemented in the CPS. If 85 percent of a school's students fell below national norms in reading, the school would be placed on academic probation. Because the CPS began both student and school accountability programs simultaneously, it is difficult to disentangle the effects of one initiative from the other conclusively. However, we do scrutinize the potential differential effects of school and student accountability by examining how trends differ across schools of different achievement levels and across students of different achievement levels, regardless of the school they attend.

Responses of Teachers and Principals

There is no doubt that the introduction of high-stakes accountability for schools and the end of social promotion for students changed the context of teaching in the Chicago Public Schools. Teachers in low-performing schools faced substantial pressure to raise test scores, and all teachers faced the challenge of improving the achievement of their lowest-performing students. Would they view district efforts as supportive of their own work in the classroom: helping to motivate students, sending the message that achievement matters, and ensuring that students have the basic skills they need before they advance to the next grade? Or would they think that high-stakes testing was directed at them: limiting autonomy in the classroom, placing excessive pressure on students and teachers, and undermining professionalism by assuming that teachers' own judgments of students' performance were wrong or inadequate?



There is no doubt that the introduction of high-stakes accountability for schools and the end of social promotion for students changed the context of teaching in the Chicago Public Schools.

We examined the teacher and principal surveys as well as the interview transcripts from the 43 teachers in low-performing schools to assess how Chicago educators viewed the initiative. Our results suggest that despite some reservations, cautions, and concerns, the majority of teachers and principals supported and endorsed the general education goals of the policy ending social promotion.

The 1999 results showed that more than 75 percent of teachers and almost 90 percent of principals indicated that they "felt supported in their efforts to help students who had been retained and who were at risk of retention." They believed they had adequate information, resources, and training to deal with these students. This was, perhaps, a remarkable show of support given the fact that, in 1998, over one-third of Chicago's elementary schools had retention rates between 6 and 16 percent and another one-third between 16 and 33 percent. Four percent of Chicago's schools retained more than one-third of 3rd, 6th, and 8th graders that year. Again, this compared with retention rates that were less than 3 percent before the policy initiative.

Better Motivation and Involvement

Teachers and principals were also positive about the influence the policy had on student motivation. In the 1999 surveys, 67 percent of teachers and 72 percent of principals agreed or strongly agreed that the threat of retention motivated students to work harder in school.

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"Because the students know," reported one 8th-grade teacher during an interview with one of the CCSR's field staff, "I'm not the one failing you, I'm not the one holding you back. And so then the students are much more motivated to do their work, especially as the year progresses." Said another teacher: "We have pupils who have become students. That is, they actually do some studying because they have a goal now, whereas before they knew that they were going to be pushed on [promoted] no matter what they did."

Teachers and principals felt that the policy had positive effects on parental involvement as well. Almost 90 percent of principals and 75 percent of teachers surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the policy had made parents more concerned about their child's progress.

What teacher would not be happy with more highly motivated students, greater parental involvement in education, and additional program supports to help struggling students? Indeed, some have suggested that ending social promotion in Chicago simply transferred responsibility for poor student performance to the students, parents, and after school and summer programs, in effect removing the burden from teachers (see Figure 1).

However, survey results do not support this hypothesis. The majority of CPS teachers and principals reported that they believed the policy of ending social promotion positively influenced their behavior and their school's instructional efforts (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). Some 85 percent of teachers and almost 90 percent of principals agreed that, as a result of the new criteria for promotion, "Nearly all teachers [in this school] feel extra responsibility to help students meet standards." More than 80 percent of teachers and principals agreed that the policy had made them more sensitive to individual students' needs and problems.

The policy, said a math teacher, "made me more accountable. It has . . . kept me on my toes the entire year. There's not one day gone by that I haven't thought about what they need to know and that if they don't pick up these skills they will not pass. And I feel it is my responsibility to get them to pass math."

Finally, teachers and principals believed that the policy affected instruction positively. More than 80 percent of teachers and 87 percent of principals surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the promotion standards had "focused the school's instructional efforts in positive ways."

Changed Instructional Practices

Even if educators viewed the initiative positively and reading and mathematics test scores were improving, questions remained. How did teachers change instruction as a result of the pressure? Did they focus more on test preparation, or did they change how they taught or what they taught so that students learned more? Could the test-score increases be sustained? To answer these questions we used survey data to trace trends in teachers' reports of the time they spent on test preparation and on the content they emphasized in mathematics and language arts instruction before and after the implementation of the new promotion policy.

From the survey data we estimated that in 1994 teachers were spending an average of about 10.5 hours a year on test preparation activities such as giving practice tests and teaching test-taking strategies. By 1999 that average had increased to 21 hours. Since the CPS's accountability policy provided strong incentives for the lowest-performing schools, these schools faced significant pressure to change behavior in order to get off, or to avoid being placed on, academic probation. Among teachers in the lowest-performing schools, we estimated that the amount of time spent on test preparation increased from 14 hours in 1994 to 32 hours in 1999.

Not surprisingly, for teachers and students in promotion-gate grades, time on test preparation increased substantially. Before the implementation of high-stakes testing, an equal proportion of teachers in each grade (about 30 percent) reported spending 20 hours or more on test preparation each year. By 1999 almost two-thirds of all teachers in the 3rd and 8th grades reported spending more than 20 hours a year on test preparation. In no other grades were such high levels of test preparation reported.

However, despite the sharp increases observed between 1994 and 1999, in 2001 the proportion of teachers who reported spending more than 20 hours a year on test preparation declined somewhat: from nearly 50 percent in 1999 to 44 percent in 2001.

Trends in Content Emphasis

Though the increased emphasis on the mechanics of taking tests should be considered a factor in the increase of mathematics and reading scores throughout this period, survey results also found signs of significant changes in teachers' emphasis on content in language arts and in the time devoted to content appropriate to grade level in mathematics.

In 1994 the average 8th-grade teacher reported spending 38 percent of her time on mathematics topics that could be considered at grade level on the ITBS. But by 2001 that average 8th-grade teacher spent 44 percent of her time on grade-level material. Similarly, the average proportion of time that 8th-grade teachers spent on the most basic mathematics concepts—those associated with 1st- through 3rd-grade material (such as simple addition, reading a clock, and multiplication facts) declined from nearly one-quarter of their mathematics instructional time in 1994 to 18 percent in 2001.

Similarly, in almost all grades except 5th, we saw significant increases in the proportion of time language arts teachers reported spending on reading. Language arts teachers devoted more time to reading comprehension than to other language

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arts topics such as study skills, penmanship, public speaking, and listening skills after the adoption of the promotion policy. As with mathematics pacing, the largest increases occurred among 7th- and 8th-grade teachers.

In survey responses, some teachers and principals reported that they spent less time on other subjects as a result of the promotion policy—some 40 percent said that they were spending less time on social studies and science—although 57 percent said they did not spend less time on those subjects because of the new policy. Interviews suggested that many teachers welcomed the increased emphasis on basic reading and mathematics skills. As one 8th-grade teacher commented, "[Reading is] the most important thing that they're going to get out of here. It's got to be the most important. They can't function if they can't read. . . . To me, all the other things should be put aside until they can do this."

Is this content alignment positive? To the extent that the allocation of instructional effort in reading and mathematics was undesirable before policy implementation, this shift in content emphasis can be viewed positively.

Teachers reported that ending social promotion made them more sensitive to their students' needs and influenced instruction in positive ways.

Student Expectations and Academic Support

If we are to believe teachers' reports, a lot changed in the Chicago Public Schools between 1994 and 2001. Teachers reported that ending social promotion made them more sensitive to their students' needs and influenced instruction in positive ways. To what extent did the change in policy influence students' experiences of school?

The CCSR's 6th- and 8th-grade surveys ask students to respond to a series of questions about the personal support they receive from their teachers for their schoolwork, questions that addressed whether they believe their teacher was willing to give them extra help or noticed if they were having trouble learning something. In 1994 students with the lowest achievement test scores reported significantly less personal support for their schoolwork from their teachers than students performing at higher levels. That gap had closed significantly by 2001. In 2001, 6th graders of all levels of performance reported higher levels of personal support from teachers, with the most dramatic increases occurring among students with the lowest skills. The same trend was reported among 8th graders with the lowest test scores. Low-achieving 6th and 8th graders also reported much higher levels of parental support for their schoolwork in 2001 than in 1994. While parental monitoring and support of schoolwork differed dramatically across students of different achievement levels in 1994, by 2001 there were significantly fewer differences.

Finally, afterschool participation, another key indicator of student school engagement, showed a marked increase following implementation of the high-stakes policies and related programs (see Figure 1). In 1994 only 16 percent of 8th graders at moderate risk of retention reported attending an afterschool program on a regular basis. Even though it is difficult to attribute the gains to the new retention policy, since many schools began requiring it, by 2001, 43 percent of 8th graders at moderate risk reported such attendance. High-risk 8th graders showed similar improvements: their participation in afterschool programs increased from 18 percent to 34 percent in the same period.

The New Focus

For educators and policymakers across the country struggling to implement effective education reforms in the context of increased accountability, the lesson of Chicago is that accountability can and does encourage teachers and principals to pay greater attention to the lowest-performing students in their classrooms. At the same time, school districts must place a high priority on finding ways to minimize the costs associated with time spent on test preparation while maximizing the potential benefits of increased accountability. Such policies do help focus teachers' energy and attention on the appropriate content, but teachers may need help in learning to change their instructional practice. Accountability policies that are accompanied by significant investments in building teachers' capacity and skills will likely meet with the greatest success.

Robin Tepper Jacob is an associate in the Education and Family Support area at Abt Associates, Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts.
Susan Stone is an assistant professor at the School of Social Welfare at the University of California, Berkeley.

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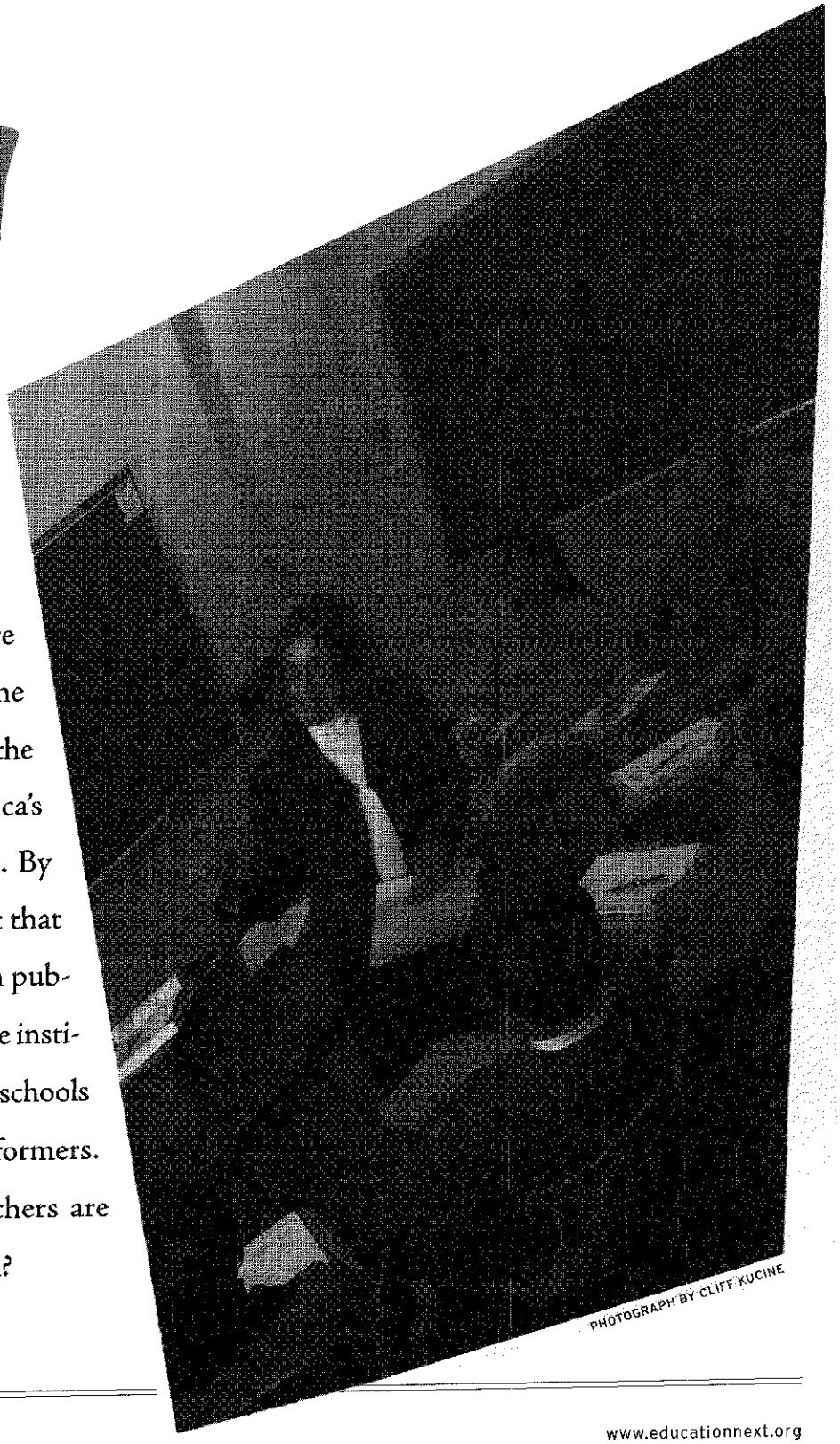
Skewed Pe

There are some 1,400 schools of education in the United States—schools that prepare the teachers who teach most of America's elementary and secondary students. By virtue of their numbers, and the fact that some 70 percent of our three million public school teachers have attended these institutions as undergraduates, education schools seem a likely subject of study for reformers. Do we know what our future teachers are learning in our schools of education?

BY DAVID STEINER



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rspective

What We Know about Teacher Preparation at Elite Education Schools

Surprisingly, neither the defenders nor the critics of education schools have produced research that answers that central question—which is why my colleague Susan Rozen and I embarked on a project several years ago to evaluate the course syllabi at selected schools of education. Our results were first presented as part of a Washington conference, sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute and the Progressive Policy Institute, then published as a chapter in the 2004 book, *A Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom*. We intended our work to be a first step in responding to the need for useful data about schools of education. What we hadn't expected was the degree of interest—pro and con—and the passions that our conclusions would attract. In fact, I was invited back to the Progressive Policy Institute a year after our report came out to debate one of our critics. (See my discussion of Dan Butin below.) This piece addresses the responses to our work, and I hope it will continue to move the discussion about this important topic forward.

Some Background

Almost all the research to date about the quality of teacher preparation has been based on highly aggregated data that makes no distinctions between education schools or on interviews with teachers-college faculty members and their students (future teachers) about their personal experiences in college.

Stanford education professor Linda Darling-Hammond and several colleagues, for instance, once surveyed 3,000 beginning teachers in New York City to examine the relationship between their accounts of their preparation program and their confidence in their readiness for teaching. The survey results suggested that "Teachers prepared in a single formal program of preparation feel better prepared than those who take a series of courses from different institutions, who in turn feel better prepared than those who enter through alternative programs . . . and those who enter without prior experience or training." But the study did not correlate teachers' *feelings* of preparedness with *measures* of effectiveness, or, indeed, with any evaluation (other than self-evaluation) of their teaching ability. Much earlier (1989), Ken Howey and Nancy Zimpher, then at Ohio State, analyzed six exemplary—so they concluded—preservice teacher-education programs, all in the Midwest, but did not correlate their interview findings with program effectiveness. The key assumption of the study was that claims of ownership and identification with a program could be linked to program effectiveness—but no external validation of such assumptions was offered in the study. Nor did Howey and Zimpher offer any detailed analysis of course syllabi at the programs they reviewed.

A rare exception to this trend was research conducted by University of Georgia professor Peter Smagorinsky and Melissa Whiting of the University of Southern Mississippi nearly a decade ago. Smagorinsky and Whiting looked at syllabi for English methods courses from 81 universities for their book *How English Teachers Get Taught: Methods of Teaching the Methods Class* (1995) and, based on their findings, recommended learner- and activity-centered ("constructivist") rather than traditional teacher-led programs. Of all these researchers, only Smagorinsky and Whiting actually reviewed a collection of syllabi, all in the field of English, to understand what prospective teachers were learning.

What We Intended

Beginning our research in 2002, my coauthor, Susan Rozen (Director of Reading/Literacy at the Bedford Public Schools in Bedford, Massachusetts), and I proceeded in the direction suggested by Smagorinsky and Whiting and decided to assess the nature of our future teachers' schooling through an evaluation of the courses they were required to take. We expanded on that effort, however, and included a broader range of subjects and greater number of syllabi in our purview.

We reviewed a sample of syllabi in 16 schools of education, 14 of which were ranked in the top 30 in the nation

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by *U.S. News and World Report* (see Figure 1). We looked at schools like Harvard, Stanford, and UCLA (top ranked by *U.S. News*) as well as Eastern Michigan University and Sonoma State (not in the magazine's top 30). We focused on initial certification programs and, within those programs, on the professional sequence required for certification. As a result, we looked at undergraduate programs, with the exception of those universities in states that required certification programs to be completed at the postbaccalaureate level (such as California). In certain universities, the traditional four-year undergraduate certification program has been expanded to five years, and it was therefore the five-year program we reviewed (e.g. Michigan State University). Where a university offered both a graduate and an undergraduate certification program, we chose the undergraduate program. We chose courses that were part of the required professional sequence because these courses are designed to prepare prospective teachers for teaching. We did not include in our review courses that were part of the general education requirements or courses that were specific to majors.

If schools of education are essential, it is in their course syllabi that we should find evidence of the fundamental pedagogical skills that such schools provide.

The syllabi we analyzed were in the domains of educational foundations, reading, and general methods courses (which typically include a student-teaching experience). In our original conference paper, we also presented findings in mathematics, but we were persuaded that in this field the academic courses were so integral to the professional preparation programs that we should not publish those findings. These domains form the heart of the education mission. If schools of education are essential, as their defenders argue, it is here that we would find evidence of the fundamental pedagogical skills that such schools provide.

Analyzing the course catalog in each university, we determined which courses in the professional sequence were required within the domains that we were reviewing. Then we gathered the syllabi for those courses from various sources, including professors, education school administrators, and the Internet. In a few cases we could not acquire a full set of the course syllabi in the domain under analysis, and so did not include that domain in our formal findings. In total, we reviewed 165 course syllabi that fell within our research criteria. Of these, 45 were in the area of the foundations of education, 61 in reading, and 59 in general methods and/or student teaching.

A Crucial Decision

As researchers, we then faced an important choice. We could simply record which texts were used in these courses and how often they were used, or we could list the books most often required (with numbers) and indicate which books were included rarely (again with numbers) or not at all. Although identifying worthy books that were not included on syllabi would open us up to criticism (as we soon discovered), the first option would have resulted in a long inventory of no clear significance, except perhaps to those within the profession. Naming books not included enabled us to draw out the significance of the books that were included. By juxtaposing counts of the most frequently required readings with the absence or near-absence of others, we were able to provide a first portrait of what future teachers are—and are not—learning at leading schools of education.

In the domain of foundations of education, the books most often required by the programs we reviewed were authored by Anita Woolfolk, Jonathan Kozol, Henry Giroux, Paulo Freire, Joel Spring, Howard Gardner, and John Dewey. Woolfolk's work is a textbook in educational psychology, and one of Joel Spring's volumes is a textbook in educational foundations. The rest are well-known works that embrace a constructivist and/or progressive standpoint. Conspicuously absent from almost all such syllabi were works that took a very different approach to teaching, such as those by E. D. Hirsch or Diane Ravitch. (We found Hirsch on two syllabi, Ravitch on just one.) Equality of education is a central theme of these courses, as evident from the included authors. Nonetheless, not one of the foundations courses, in the 15 schools of education for which we had complete data sets for that domain, asked students to read *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, at the time of our review arguably the leading collection of scholarly writings on that subject. We also noted that eight of the programs of teacher certification we reviewed did not cover either the philosophy or the history of education among the courses required for certification.

In our review of the courses in the teaching of reading, we followed the same approach. Here, however, we could draw on the findings of the National Reading Panel (NRP) and the National Research Council (NRC) to determine what was missing from the syllabi. Although recent research on reading is incorporated into some programs, work by Louisa Moats, Jeanne Chall, and Marilyn Adams—whose books and articles

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have been referenced frequently and used to support conclusions by the NRP and NRC—is rarely required. Analyzing the assignments and assessments listed in the syllabi, we also noted how rarely students were required to demonstrate competence in teaching reading skills and strategies. They were infrequently asked to demonstrate knowledge through presenting a lesson on critical reading skills in class or through taking a quiz or test.

Finally, we looked at the general methods courses and student-teaching experience. Here the norm is that the student first takes a methods course and then spends time in a public school classroom. While we again looked at required readings, for a gauge of the teaching experience part of the curriculum we focused on the handbooks that were provided to students as they entered their practicum and the descriptions of the practicum available in the course catalogs and/or on the web. Of the 11 schools from which we could get full data sets, just two indicated that they videotape their students' teaching. Handbooks and catalog descriptions also suggested that professors at schools of education do not go to the schools to observe their students teach, but typically rely on adjunct instructors to report on the student teachers' instructional performance. Finally, we found no evidence that in the practicum student teachers were being assessed on the basis of measured student performance. However, we have since learned that a very small number of schools of education are beginning to introduce this mode of assessment.

Strong Reactions

As a first effort to look at syllabi of required courses, our research represents a beginning. Fair concerns can be raised about technical matters. We were careful to name the 16 schools of education, and to define and list the number of courses and programs in each of the three domains we studied (foundations, reading, and methods), thus allowing other researchers to fully replicate our work. But we did not list the individual syllabi or name the particular schools (out of the 16) from which we were able to get full syllabi sets in each subdomain. It was clear when we sought syllabi from faculty members that, had we not assured their anonymity, we would not have obtained many of those syllabi: thus our choice to present aggregated data. Our data set was relatively small; certainly students take more than those courses that are required for certification, and a full survey would examine the many electives. We hope to address these issues in follow-up studies. When we conducted the research, more than half the schools of education listed many of their course syllabi on the web. Since that time, more are doing so. Ideally, this will allow future studies to include greater disaggregation of the data set.

Technical questions were not, however, the subject of most of the criticism we received at the Washington conference and in subsequent written and oral critiques. Kati Haycock, executive director of the Education Trust, said that we shouldn't have focused on this "proxy stuff" and should have instead studied the links between individual teachers and their students' achievement. We could agree with that—and have said that we encourage such research, although it is statistically very challenging. Meanwhile, our study focused elsewhere, on the quality of teacher preparation. Arthur Wise, president of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (the group that accredits almost half of the nation's schools of education), argued that he didn't think our survey sample was representative of "what's going on at the institutions that prepare most of the nation's teachers." This is a fair objection, which we (and others) are now addressing, but a review of the top-ranked schools tells us what the profession looks toward as its best models. The faculty at elite schools are very influential in national policy debates, and they also train the future faculty at many less elite schools. Thus an analysis of elite schools, we believe, gives us important data from which we can draw some, albeit tentative, conclusions.

Syllabi from the following schools were studied for this report (Figure 1)

University of Georgia	Eastern Michigan University
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign	Harvard University
University of Maryland	Indiana University
University of Michigan	Michigan State University
University of Texas	Penn State University
University of Virginia	Sonoma State University
University of Wisconsin	Stanford University
Columbia University	UCLA

SOURCE: Author

Other critics were harsher. Stanford education professor Darling-Hammond, author of *The Right to Learn* and well-known in our field for her emphasis on the importance of schools of education and professional certification for teachers, accused me of using "personal and political" standards and castigated our study as one of those "diatribes that come at the problems ideologically." David Labaree, also from Stanford and author of *The Trouble with Ed Schools*, argued that we were wrong to take syllabi as serious evidence of anything: they are "more an ideological portrait of a course than actual substance." As an observation about the nature and limits of syllabi, Labaree's point is not to be denied: syllabi vary in their level of detail, ranging from a schematic account of texts, topics, and course requirements to a week-by-week specification of readings and assignments, along with supplementary readings, grading rubrics and formulas, and lengthy expositions of the perspective of the instructor. The thinner syllabi capture less information, and even the most complete

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will not capture what videotapes, for instance, would—the manner of presentation, the mode of teaching, the reactions of the students in class. But none of this undercuts our findings. The choice of readings is explicit in every syllabus and clearly indicates the formal content that the student should expect to encounter in the course. And by the same token, it is unlikely that much time in a class is devoted to texts that are not on the syllabus.

The critics were not done. The most recent critique of our efforts, from Dan Butin of Gettysburg College, calls me "disingenuous" for distinguishing empirical research about learning to read from opinions of professors who teach foundations courses. Professors speaking off the cuff at conferences or writing letters to others in the profession have fed into the controversy. Internet education blog Eduwonk.com eventually decried what it called "a nasty whispering campaign." Frequently, we have had to point out that courses cited to us as evidence against our findings were not required courses but electives, just as our paper had made clear.

Our complaint about the syllabi is a classic liberal one: students were not being exposed to a variety of important arguments and points of view.

The strength of the discourse can, in all fairness, partly be blamed on us. Our complaint about the syllabi is a classic liberal one: students were not being exposed to a variety of important arguments and points of view. But it is true that we were deeply surprised by what our research found, and we expressed that surprise in our conference paper in strong language. We were perhaps too quick in using provocative phrases in our initial paper. Such phrases as "intellectually barren" and "too focused on indoctrination" unsurprisingly fueled incendiary comments. However, a problem of language cannot be taken to invalidate our conclusions.

Our Answers

Whispers—and personal attacks—aside, it is worth responding to the more substantive arguments of our critics. In a piece published electronically by Columbia University Teacher College's *TCRecord* last August, Dan Butin raised an important issue of causality in an extensive critique. "There is an extremely loose coupling between what is written and what is taught," he argued, "between what is taught and what is learned, and between what is learned and what is subsequently enacted in an efficacious way." And though Butin rightly points out that we did not address those linkages, he says about his own paper, "This study will not address these assumptions either." Butin's point, of course, is equally applicable to all formal education: taken to its logical conclusion it suggests—counterintuitively—that we should not care about what is taught since education makes no difference to our future practice. At the very least, if future teachers are taught to believe in one set of principles and are subsequently forced to abandon them in practice, their professional preparation is problematic. It is worth adding that Butin criticized me for insisting on balance: "Steiner's criteria of balance . . . focus on the wrong agenda." Butin argues that I should have realized that reading books from only one perspective will enable "deep analysis." Butin's intellectual embrace of fundamentalism, the absolutism of his antiliberal stance, once again comes as something of a shock.

As for Linda Darling-Hammond's claim that our standards of review were personal and political, we couldn't disagree more. And we have explained and defended our standards in our published chapter: where there is empirical evidence for the positive impact of good teaching practices, we used it to infer what should be included in a teacher preparation course—thus the standards we suggested for the teaching of reading. Scholars disagree, naturally, about which empirical studies are most persuasive. However, our work is based on a broad set of major national research findings. In this domain, at least, the charge of playing personal politics looks a little shaky. In other cases, however, such as in our review of the foundations of education courses, no such empirical data are available. So, for example, we looked for readings that have stood the test of time and/or have proved influential in our current education debate. And we sought evidence that professors who were teaching their students about good teaching practices were also analyzing video of their students actually engaged in their student teaching. We were basing those desiderata not on research-based evidence, but on the assumption that education-school faculty would naturally wish to give direct feedback to this critical part of their student's preparation for their profession.

It is therefore in these two areas—foundations courses and teaching methods—that one imagines that Darling-Hammond's critique was intended to cut most sharply. Only a personal or political decision, apparently, could explain our hope for finding Plato as well as Dewey, or works by critics as well as defenders of multiculturalism. (I intend "multiculturalism" to be understood here not as describing our condition, but as embodying a particular progressive political and pedagogical program.) To ask that students be required to

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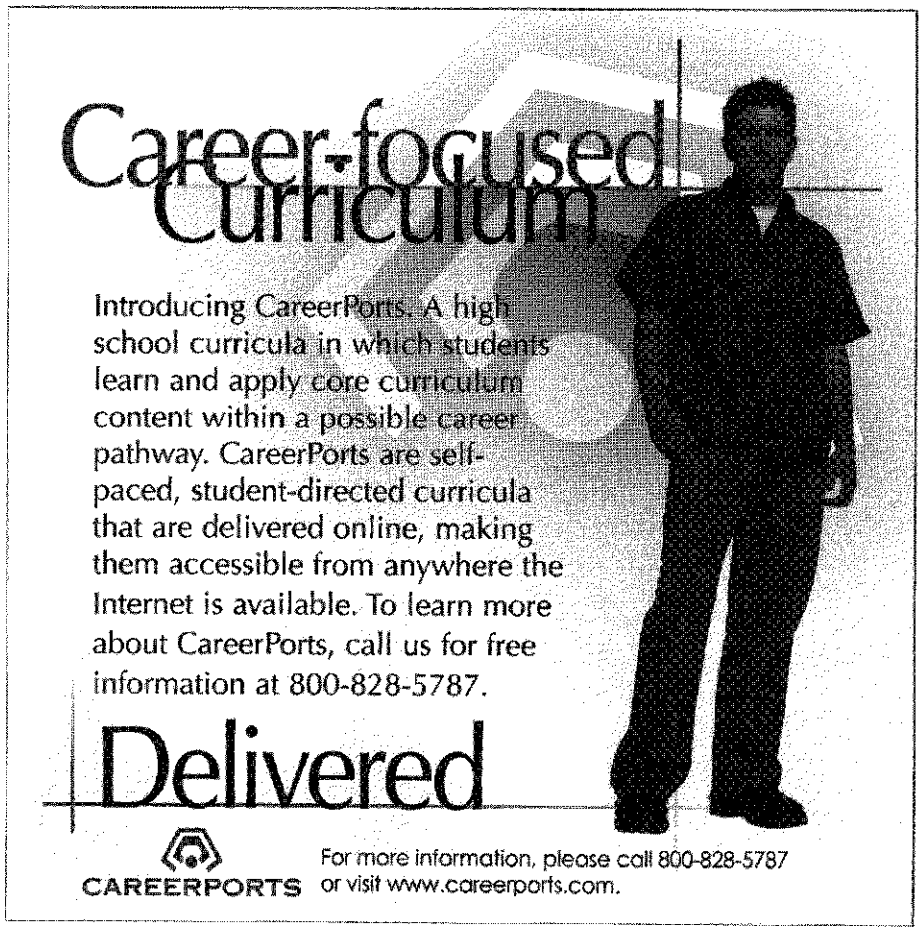
read E. D. Hirsch's critique of Dewey while also asking that they read Dewey is thus to render a personal—since it is not an empirically or research-based—opinion. It is not, however, a political decision, unless, of course, one believes a call for balance is in itself political.

It is also important to note, in this context, that at the time of writing up our research, the coursework Stanford's school of education required for teacher certification was on the web. Heading up the material was a list of suggested readings for new students in the program. At the time we reviewed the list, it comprised works by Gloria Ladson Billings, Elizabeth Cohen and Rachel Lotan (eds.), Linda Darling-Hammond, Howard Gardner, Jonathan Kozol, Deborah Meier, Jeannie Oakes, Laurie Olsen, Vivian Paley, Mike Rose, Frank Smith, David Tyack and Larry Cuban, and Guadalupe Valdes. There is as little empirical evidence that reading these books will improve one's teaching as there is for any other list of foundational texts. To take one example, if reading Deborah Meier's moving book (*The Power of Their Ideas*) about turning around a school enabled her readers to duplicate her performance as principal of Central Park East, urban education in the United States would be very different. What standards, therefore, did Darling-Hammond and her colleagues use in recommending their own books and those of the others they place on the list? Most likely, personal and political opinion, grounded in deeply held convictions.

But this response may occlude a deeper set of issues. The premise of Darling-Hammond's charge is that there are standards for the choice of foundation course readings that are neither personal nor political. What could such standards be? On what "objective ground" does one choose Dewey over Plato, or ask for X rather than Y? One reasonable response is to suggest that such choices, at their thoughtful and considered best, represent not simply opinions but judgments, and to insist on the difference between the two. The judgment that future teachers should have read a Socratic dialogue is based on the experience of two millennia of readers, who have found in those dialogues an inexhaustible set of questions, problems, and insights. By contrast, a close review of that list of readings that Stanford University recommended to its new student-teachers is instructive. All of these authors are American, and all but one of their books was written in the past 30 years. In short, one of our top schools of education is convinced that nothing from China or Europe or Africa, and nothing written before 1974 merits inclusion. Rather than characterize the Stanford list (or our own call for balance) as the result of personal and political opinion, I would suggest it embodies an effort of judgment: a serious effort to shape the fundamental worldview of future teachers. It is this judgment that we should be discussing. My own is that as teachers, we join a community and a craft that stretch back for millennia. We owe it to the next generation of teachers to introduce them properly to the richness and depth that is the legacy of those who have come before.

David Steiner was until recently the chairman of the Department of Education Policy at the School of Education at Boston University. He is currently on leave to serve as Director of Arts Education at the National Endowment for the Arts. The opinions expressed here are his own.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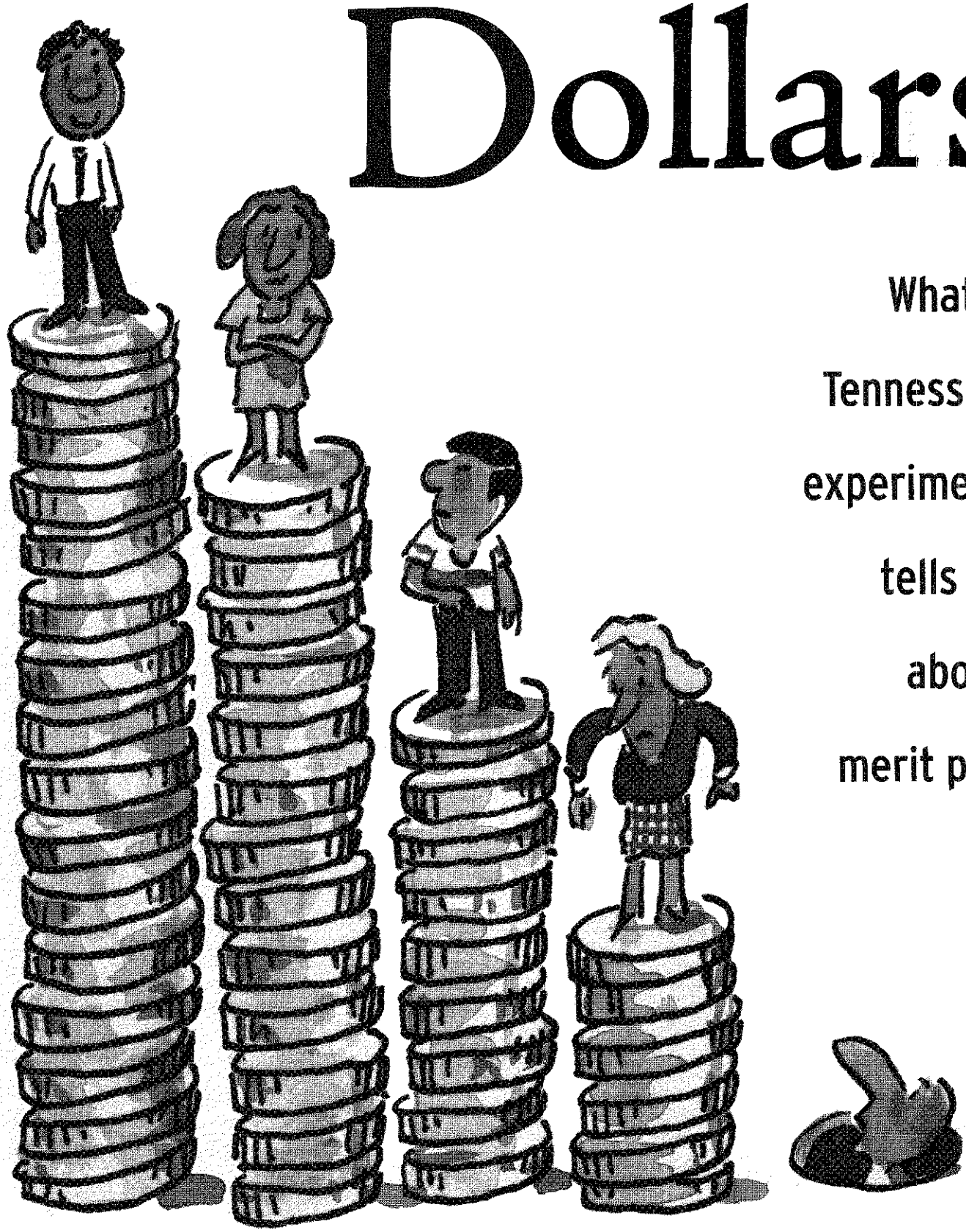
Dollars

What a Tennessee experiment tells us about merit pay



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AND Sense

Though the dramatic effects that teachers have on student achievement are indisputable, the exact ingredients of effective teaching are anything but settled. Questions about how to value experience, education, certification, and pedagogical skills—the big four of teacher inputs—have created one of the most highly contentious fields of inquiry in education, particularly since they have clear implications for the design of teacher compensation systems.

In 2000, public elementary and secondary schools spent roughly $180 billion on teachers' salaries and benefits, about half of their total expenditures; most of it was distributed according to fixed salary schedules that considered only a teacher's education and years of experience. This system has its origins in the first half of the 20th century and was partly a response to the racial and gender discrimination that existed under more discretionary systems at that time.

However, over the past 20 years more educators have wondered whether such pay packages can attract, motivate, and retain high-quality teachers in a highly competitive professional world (see *Forum*, page 8). In response to such concerns, there was a flurry of merit pay activity in the early 1980s. Twenty-nine states had initiated some sort of merit pay program for teachers by 1986. Since then, however, almost all of them have been diluted or discontinued. A 1997 study by economists Dale Ballou and Michael Podgursky reported that 12 percent of school districts were using merit pay in some way, but the amount of incentive in these districts averaged only two percent of base pay.

Critics of merit pay argue that the falloff in such programs was due to the fundamental technical difficulties of accurately identifying effective teachers and rewarding good teaching practices. Proponents of performance-based pay insist that these experiments were too limited in scope and were destined to fail in the face of stiff opposition from teachers and unions.

BY THOMAS S. DEE AND BENJAMIN J. KEYS

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Despite widespread pessimism among educators about whether merit pay systems can effectively reward good teachers, most of the limited empirical evidence has been surprisingly positive. For example, two studies (in 1992 and 1997) found that the math and reading test scores of students in South Carolina improved significantly when the students were taught by teachers receiving merit pay. Similarly, related and more recent literature suggests that mathematics students learn more when their teachers have certification in mathematics.

Despite widespread pessimism among educators about whether merit pay systems can effectively reward good teachers, most of the limited empirical evidence has been surprisingly positive.

Policymakers should be cautious in interpreting this sort of evidence, however, as the apparent benefits of certification could merely reflect differences in the students placed in their classrooms. For example, teachers who receive merit pay may tend to select schools and classes whose students are high achievers for other reasons. Likewise, parents especially engaged in their children's education may work to ensure their assignment to teachers with strong credentials. Such subtle differences may not be visible in the data typically available to researchers.

New Evidence

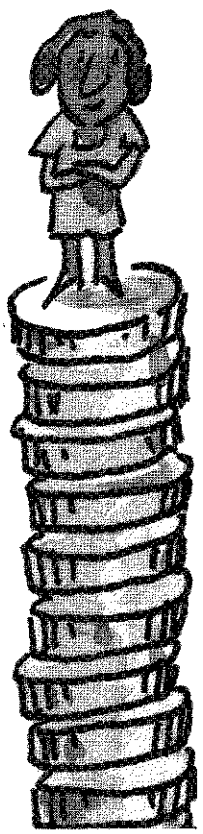
The effectiveness of these short-lived merit pay programs is exceptionally difficult to measure because of these selection effects. However, the fortuitous overlap of two Tennessee programs from the mid-1980s and 1990s provides an unusual opportunity to circumvent this problem. Project STAR (Student Teacher Achievement Ratio) was a large-scale class-size experiment that began with kindergarten students in the fall of 1985. At roughly the same time, the Volunteer State began directing pay increases to teachers deemed meritorious under a Career Ladder Evaluation System.

The fact that both teachers and students in schools participating in Project STAR were assigned randomly to classrooms allows for an especially rigorous test of whether a merit pay system can effectively reward good teachers.

Before describing the Tennessee programs in detail, however, we need to take a closer look at some of the objections to merit pay for teachers. One concerns the problem of designing valid evaluation procedures for measuring teacher performance. Under an efficient merit pay plan in any industry, employers should be able to explain clearly why an employee did not receive merit pay and what he or she would need to do to get it. Whether these conditions can be met in the teaching profession, where there is no single blueprint for effective practice, has been the most contentious issue surrounding merit pay. This evaluation problem is further complicated by the fact that schools have goals other than cognitive achievement (for instance, promoting citizenship, fostering individual development, and reducing drug use and violence) that are difficult to measure and are often achieved only with teachers' cooperation.

These concerns raise the possibility that attempts to reward meritorious teachers could even have perverse consequences. For example, merit pay systems may discourage cooperation among teachers or otherwise foster a demoralizing and unproductive work environment.

While these problems may explain why merit pay plans have often been dismantled, some researchers suggest that they are excuses, not reasons. Dale Ballou, an economist at Vanderbilt University, has argued that merit pay is widely and successfully used in private schools, which suggests that there is nothing unique about education that makes merit pay infeasible or unattractive. Ballou notes that the amount of merit pay in private schools is quite large and that the teachers who report receiving it have earnings that are nearly 10 percent higher than their nonmerit counterparts. In contrast, the earnings of merit pay teachers in public schools are only 2 percent higher than their nonmerit colleagues. Ballou attributes the frequent dismantling of alternative compensation for public school teachers to union opposition.



The Career Ladder

Can we devise a merit pay system that overcomes the challenges of definitional clarity and valid measurement? Can we do so without directly incorporating measures of students' progress on standardized tests?

The Tennessee programs initiated by Governor Lamar Alexander in 1984 offer some reason to believe that we can. At the same time, they underscore the considerable difficulty of doing so in a fair, equitable, and effective manner.

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Part of Tennessee's Comprehensive Educational Reform Act, the Career Ladder Evaluation System was both well funded and sophisticated in its approach to teacher evaluation. As Richard M. Brandt, a professor at the University of Virginia, wrote in 1995, the program was "perhaps the country's most comprehensive experiment in summative evaluation."

Governor Alexander, who would go on to become secretary of education under President George H. W. Bush and is now a U.S. senator, was more colloquial in his description, calling the program "an old-fashioned horse trade with teachers. Taxpayers said to teachers, 'The state will pay you up to 70 percent more based on your performance if you'll promise to be evaluated every five years.'"

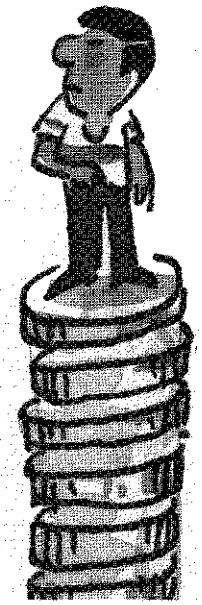
Governor Alexander called the program "an old-fashioned horse trade with teachers. Taxpayers said to teachers, 'The state will pay you up to 70 percent more based on your performance if you'll promise to be evaluated every five years.'"

Rung by Rung

While it lasted—for 13 years—the now-defunct Career Ladder had many of the elements that merit pay backers believed a good program should have, including multidimensional evaluations and a hierarchy of professional development (in other words, a career ladder) that was coordinated with significant financial and professional rewards.

The ladder had five distinct stages, ranging from probationary to master. Fast-track options allowed those who had been teaching before 1984 to advance immediately, subject to successful evaluations, to a career level matching their experience.

For new teachers, however, the first rung of the career ladder was a one-year probation supervised by two tenured teachers from their school. Subject to a favorable review by the school district, using state-approved criteria, these teachers were then placed on apprentice status for three years. At the end of those three years, the school district could recommend that the teacher be granted a five-year certification for professional, or Career Level I, status, which included a $1,000 salary supplement from the state.



Then, at the end of the five-year Level I stage, a teacher could either apply for another five-year Level I certification or seek a five-year certification as a Level II teacher. Advancement required evidence of superior performance, as defined by a state commission and the state board of education, but it also came with a $2,000 state supplement for those who chose a 10-month contract and $4,000 for those choosing an 11-month contract, a significant bonus to teachers' salaries at the time.

At the end of the Level II certification period, the same kind of option was available: a teacher could seek recertification at Level II or pass more rigorous evaluations to receive a Level III certification and a salary supplement of as much as $7,000.

The evaluations that occurred at each stage of the career ladder assessed teachers on multiple "domains of competence" using several distinct data sources (such as student and principal questionnaires, peer evaluations, a teacher's portfolio, and a written test). On the first three rungs of the ladder (probation, apprentice, Level I), the local school districts were responsible for evaluating and certifying performance. The key evaluator at these stages—typically the principal—received three to five days of state training on evaluation instruments and procedures. In contrast, the evaluations for certifications at Levels II and III were conducted largely by a three-member team of peers from outside the teacher's district. These evaluators received three to four weeks of training and were often Level III teachers from other districts who had been borrowed for a year by the state certification commission. The extensive training provided to the Level II and Level III evaluators was considered appropriate since they fielded more complex evaluation instruments intended to discriminate among "good, superior, and outstanding" teachers.

Under the original formulation of the career ladder, participation was optional for veteran teachers and mandatory for new teachers. It was initially expected that new teachers who failed to advance to Level I status after their apprenticeship would be fired, since they would no longer be eligible for the state portion of their salary. However, in 1987, the career ladder was revised to make it optional for all teachers. The major consequence of failing to advance to Level I status was essentially the lost opportunity for the salary supplement.

Interestingly, it appears that relatively few teachers faced this cost. Nearly all of the state's teachers (94 percent of them, according to one report) chose to enter the career-ladder program. A state audit in 1991 revealed that 95 percent of eligible teachers had achieved

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Level I certification, prompting criticism that the standards for this designation had been severely diluted. However, among teachers applying for certification at Levels II and III, the success rate was only 79 percent.

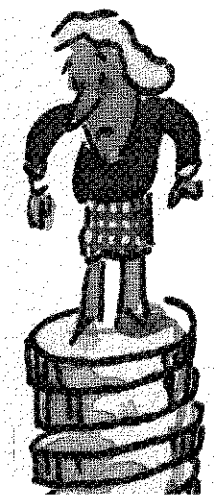
Though most teachers chose to participate, and the success rates for certification were quite high, some expressed criticisms that echoed issues often raised by merit pay critics: for example, that three classroom visits (some of them prearranged) were inadequate for evaluating teaching performance objectively and that separating the staff into levels strained relations among teachers and hurt morale. Even the application process was criticized for emphasizing, as the *Christian Science Monitor* reported, "cunning and endurance . . . rather than merit." The criticisms suggest that, despite the relative sophistication of the career ladder, its efficacy in rewarding high-quality teachers remains an open question.

The criticisms suggest that, despite the relative sophistication of the career ladder, its efficacy in rewarding high-quality teachers remains an open question.

Project STAR

Coincidentally, a compelling way to evaluate the success of the career ladder system comes via data from Governor Alexander's Student Teacher Achievement Ratio program. Project STAR was an experimental study of class-size reduction that also began in the fall of 1985. That year, it included 6,325 kindergarten students from 79 participating schools. The experiment lasted for three more years, following students through the 3rd grade. Overall, roughly 11,600 students participated, with additional students entering the participating schools in the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades. Participating schools were drawn from around the state and, by legislative mandate, included inner-city and suburban schools from larger metropolitan areas (Knoxville, Nashville, Memphis, and Chattanooga) as well as rural schools and those from smaller towns. All students in classrooms included in the experiment were given the Stanford Achievement Tests in math and reading in the spring of each year.

Pooling the information from the experiment's four years yields a single data set with roughly 24,000 student observations for each subject. Roughly one-third of these observations are for black students, and nearly half were for students eligible for the free-lunch program. Fully 91 percent of the student observations in the dataset come from classrooms taught by teachers participating in the career ladder: 15 percent had teachers with probationary or apprentice status, 69 percent had teachers at Level I, while just seven percent had teachers who had reached Level II or III.



The key feature of the experimental design of Project STAR was that students and teachers within participating schools and grades were randomly assigned to one of three class types: small classes, regular-sized classes, or regular-sized classes with teacher aides. These random assignments allow us to use the STAR data to compare the performance of students assigned to career-ladder teachers with the performance of students in the same school and grade who were assigned to nonparticipating teachers.

Restricting the comparison to students attending the same school is essential because student-teacher pairings were random only within a given school. That is, the experiment did not move students and teachers to schools they would not otherwise have attended or staffed. This unfortunately means that some schools in the data set—those with classrooms taught by teachers with the same career-ladder status—do not offer useful information for looking at the effects of career-ladder status.

It should also be noted that student attrition from schools participating in the experiment was high, ranging from 20 to 30 percent each year, and that roughly 10 percent of students moved between small and regular classes. While most of the movement between classes was due to parental complaints or behavioral problems, the attrition figures could also reflect other factors unrelated to the study, such as students' moving out of a school's geographic zone or having to repeat a grade. However, if parents of students with unobserved propensities for high achievement sought out master teachers by class reassignment or by moving to another school altogether, our results would overstate the quality of career-ladder teachers.

Fortunately, we expect that these problems are less important for a study of the career ladder than for one about class size. Unlike a multiyear assignment to a particular class size, a one-year assignment to a particular teacher does not provide a strong incentive for attrition or reassignment. Students would be assigned a new teacher in the next academic year. By contrast, students placed in a large class were expected to remain in large classes through the 3rd grade.

Still, to evaluate whether the experiment successfully matched students and teachers randomly within schools, we examined the association between students' traits and their assignment to a teacher of their own race. If the pairings of students and teachers were indeed random and remained so over time, we should find no within-school association between observed student traits and exposure

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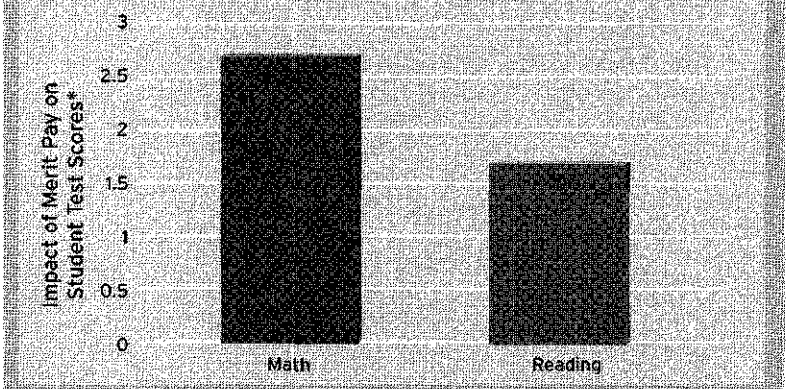
to teachers in the career ladder. As expected, students' race, gender, age, eligibility for the free-lunch program, and class-size assignment all exhibit small and statistically weak within-school relationships with assignment to a career-ladder participant.

Finally, because the student-teacher pairings were initially random, any statistically significant difference in performance between students with and without career-ladder teachers should be attributable to true differences in the quality of the teachers. The most conventional interpretation of such performance differences would be that the program provided effective incentives for teachers and that the evaluations carefully discriminated among teachers of high and low quality. However, the high pass rates on career-ladder evaluations suggest that these assessments were not particularly discriminating (at least through Level I). This raises the possibility that, if career-ladder teachers were more effective, it was simply because better teachers were more willing to negotiate the bureaucratic impediments to advancing on the career ladder. Nonetheless, even if the career ladder led only to self-sorting of teachers by quality, it would indicate that the program successfully directed its financial and professional rewards to meritorious teachers.

Merit Pay for Teachers Equals Higher Scores for Students (Figure 1)

K–3 students whose teachers earned merit pay scored higher in both math and reading than those students whose teachers were paid under the conventional structure.



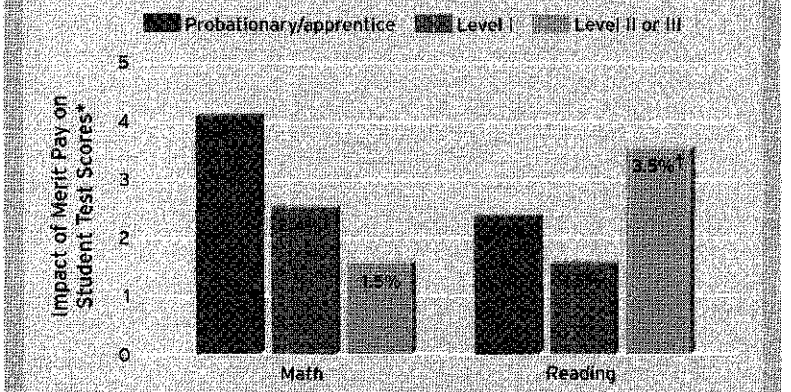
* Percentile scores

** Statistically significant at the 5 percent level

SOURCE: Authors' calculations

Merit Pay Works for Beginning Teachers — and Experienced Ones Too (Figure 2)

Reading scores of students with career teachers rose sharply when merit pay was introduced. Math gains were greatest for students of newer teachers.



* Percentile scores

** Statistically significant at the 5 percent level

† Statistically significant at the 10 percent level

SOURCE: Authors' calculations

Results

To see what these Tennessee programs tell us about merit pay, let's first look at the effects simply of having a teacher in the career-ladder program, ignoring for the moment the teacher's specific level of accomplishment. To eliminate the effects of any chance differences in performance caused by other observable characteristics, our analysis takes into account students' age, gender, race, and eligibility for the free lunch program; whether they had been assigned to a small class; and whether they were assigned to a teacher of the same race—which earlier research using these same data found to have a large positive effect on student performance (see "The Race Connection," Spring 2004). We also include as control variables two conventional indicators of teacher quality: experience and possession of a graduate degree.

Our main results indicate that students with career-ladder teachers scored nearly 3 percentile points higher in mathematics than students with other teachers. They also suggest that reading scores were nearly 2 percentile points higher among these students, though the results for reading fall just short of conventional levels of statistical significance (see Figure 1).

The estimated effects on reading scores are statistically indistinguishable from zero primarily because they are less precise. If the effect on reading performance of having a career-ladder teacher were as precisely estimated as the effect of being in a smaller class, it would also be statistically significant. That it is not may reflect the fact that the experiment was designed to evaluate the effects of differences in class size, not the career-ladder program.

Regardless, our best guess is that having a career-ladder teacher in either subject had a quite large effect. The estimated gains associated with assignment to a career-ladder teacher equal 40 to 60 percent of the gains associated with assignment to a

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class with roughly 15 students rather than 22. Furthermore, the gains are approximately equivalent to a third of the black-white gap in test scores among students in the experiment.

When evaluating these results, it is important to keep in mind that 91 percent of the student observations in the data set came from classrooms with teachers certified by the career ladder. The benefits of having a career-ladder teacher are measured relative to a somewhat atypical base—namely, the small group of students whose teachers chose not to apply for the program or were unsuccessful in their application.

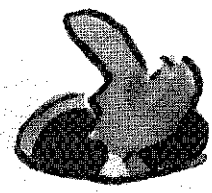
Students with career-ladder teachers scored nearly 3 percentile points higher in mathematics than students with other teachers.

Our second analysis, therefore, considered not only the teacher's participation in a career ladder, but also the teacher's status within the program. That is, we looked separately at the effects of having a teacher at the probationary or apprentice level, at Level I, and at Level II or III.

In math, the career-ladder teachers at the probationary/apprentice level and at Level I were the most successful at promoting achievement. In contrast, career-ladder teachers at the master level did not have a statistically significant effect on math scores (see Figure 2).

This surprising pattern could in theory reflect the success of the career ladder in attracting (and retaining) new, high-ability math teachers and in providing these new teachers with early mentoring and professional development. However, an alternative explanation is that novice teachers, many of whom quickly leave teaching, happen to be particularly adept at teaching math. The fact that we have already controlled for differences in teachers' experience makes this explanation unlikely. Moreover, a similar pattern emerges when we look only at students with teachers having five or more years of experience, a good number of whom remained at the probationary/apprentice level (perhaps because fast-track options were not available in their area). In short, it appears that the career ladder simply was not very effective at distinguishing superior or outstanding math teachers from those who were merely competent.

In reading, by contrast, assignment to a Level II or Level III teacher was associated with a large and statistically significant increase in reading achievement, while estimates of the effects of having a teacher from both of the other two groups remained positive but statistically insignificant. This suggests the career ladder may have been modestly successful in identifying the most outstanding teachers in reading.



Conclusions

Overall, our results suggest that Tennessee's Career Ladder Evaluation System was at least partially successful at rewarding teachers who were relatively effective at promoting student achievement. Though the program was voluntary for veteran teachers, the combination of large bonuses and relatively undemanding evaluations—at least at the lower levels—led the vast majority of teachers to enter. Nonetheless, assignment to a teacher who had been certified by the career-ladder evaluations led to large and statistically significant increases in mathematics scores and sizable, though statistically insignificant, increases in reading scores.

But our findings also suggest that the teachers who were on the highest rungs of the career ladder (and received the largest pay increases) were not consistently better at promoting student achievement. In reading, only students with a teacher at the highest levels of the career ladder made statistically significant gains. In contrast, the math-score gains associated with having a career-ladder teacher actually appear to have been concentrated among students with teachers on the *lowest* rungs of the career ladder. These mixed findings underscore the challenge of designing a system of teachers' compensation that rewards quality in a fair and equitable manner—a political challenge as much as a technical one.

Despite some success in rewarding teachers for producing better student outcomes, the career ladder was a target of the same criticisms that challenge virtually all attempts to tinker with systems of teachers' compensation. A few years of budgetary constraints helped kill the will to keep it all together. Thus, having made participation in the career ladder voluntary for teachers in 1987, it was perhaps inevitable that the Tennessee legislature in 1997 voted to prevent additional teachers from entering the program and becoming eligible for merit bonuses. Teachers already in the program, though no longer subject to regular evaluations, were allowed to keep their bonuses for the duration of their careers.

As Lamar Alexander lamented at the time, "Those who questioned the Model-T Ford didn't try to kill it. They replaced it with something better." Continuing debates over merit pay programs in districts in Tennessee and beyond indicate that efforts to find such a replacement are under way. But it may still be too early to tell whether the future for merit pay for teachers will resemble that of the Edsel or the Mustang.

Thomas S. Dee is an assistant professor in the Department of Economics at Swarthmore College.
Benjamin J. Keys is a graduate student in the Department of Economics at the University of Michigan.

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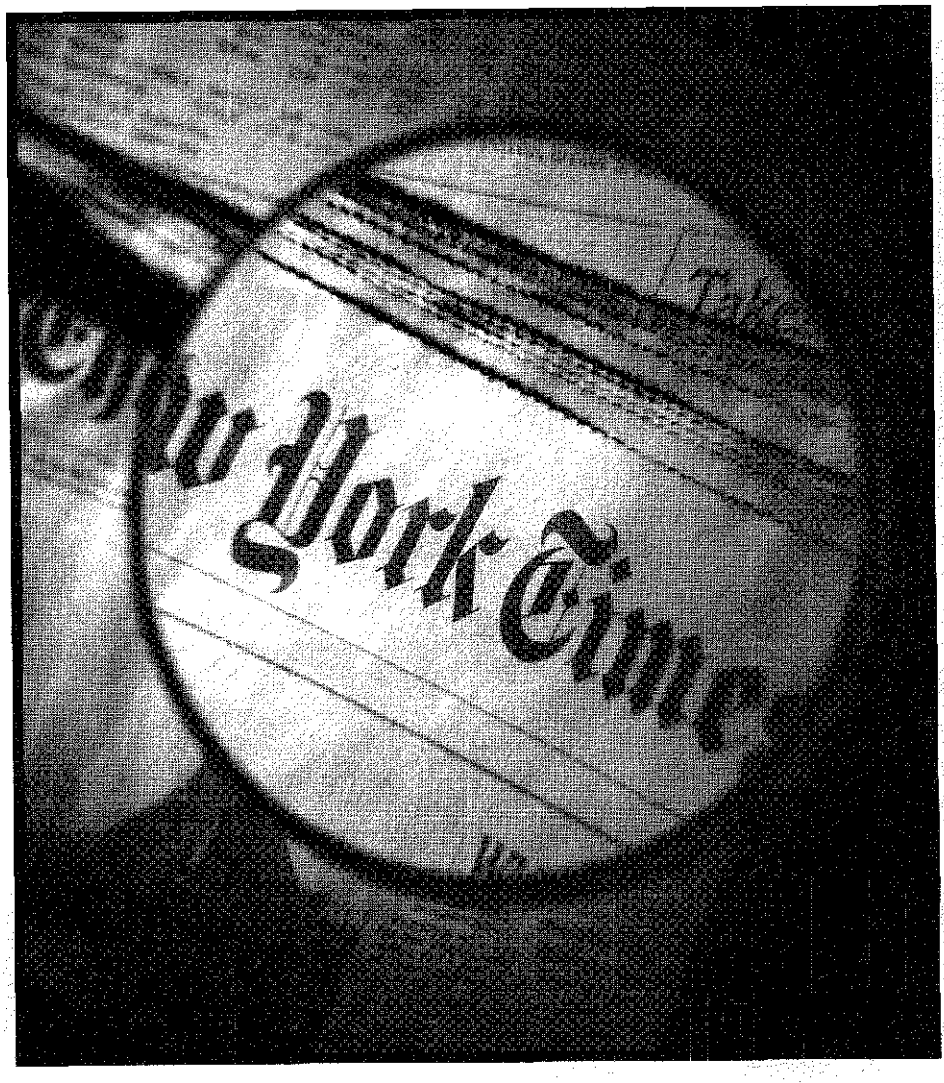
No Distortion Left Behind

The New York Times *Education Columnist Gets It Wrong*

Checked:
Michael Winerip, "On Education,"
New York Times, *January 8, 2003*
to May 26, 2004

by Andrew J. Rotherham



PHOTOGRAPH BY WEBB CHAPELL

Let's stipulate that the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the federal education law signed by President Bush in January of 2002, is a complicated piece of legislation. The law's official conference report runs to 1,080 pages and covers a host of issues, many not even related to the law's central thrust. But let's also stipulate that many, many other laws—from taxes to environmental regulation—are no less challenging to understand and interpret, which is why journalists at the nation's best news outlets often have areas of specific expertise.

So, is it asking too much to expect those in the media charged with writing about education and NCLB to make some effort to describe them accurately? And shouldn't we expect one of the nation's most visible and influential education journalists to get it right?

I'm sympathetic to the myriad challenges that journalists face, but NCLB's heft and the political battles around it are no excuse for someone like Michael Winerip, who writes the weekly "On Education" column for the *New York Times* (he is currently on a sabbatical to write a book), to distort the law into a vague semblance of reality. Take his September 24, 2003, column, for instance. Under the headline "On Front Lines, Casualties Tied to New U.S. Law," Winerip reported that NCLB funding shortfalls were "devastating" for New York City. But he neglected to mention that the city had received more than $260 million in new dollars for poor students *alone* under NCLB in the previous two years (see "Who Got the Raw Deal in Gotham?" page 72).

It is especially problematic when the distortion is in the nation's putative "newspaper of record." As former *Los Angeles Times* education writer Richard Colvin, who now heads the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media, says, Winerip's "On Education" is "agenda setting" because of its influence on policymakers: "Editors across the country read what's in that column and it informs their decisions."

Winerip's misleading writing about NCLB is particularly surprising because he has produced an impressive body of important journalism in a career of more than 20 years at the *Times*, reporting on everything from city politics in the 1980s to vital national issues in the 1990s.

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In 2000, Winerip was part of a *Times* team that produced a Pulitzer Prize-winning series on race in America. Many of his education columns are outstanding because of his clear eye for important subjects, including those that go unnoticed. For instance, he is one of the few reporters writing about the difficulties gay students face in school. And he can turn out delightfully quirky and interesting profiles, like his April 21, 2004, column about an 81-year-old woman returning to law school alongside hypercompetitive 20-somethings.

Obsessed with NCLB

But the very skills that produced this career of important work are missing in his writing about NCLB, which, needless to say, is an enormously important issue in education right now. In fact, since his first "On Education" column (January 8, 2003) to his last before going on sabbatical (May 26, 2004), Winerip devoted 15 columns—23 percent of his total—to NCLB, which he opined (October 1, 2003), "may go down in history as the most unpopular piece of education legislation ever created."

It's hard to know why Winerip became a knee-jerk NCLB-basher. But it's not hard to see that he is one; nor need one be a partisan of the Bush administration (which I certainly am not) to grasp that his stance is costing the *Times* a chance to engage constructively in the debate about the law. There *are* problems with NCLB that scream for thoughtful explanation, rigorous attention, and public concern. This is not surprising with a federal law as complicated as NCLB. Any writer seeking to focus on it enjoys what the military would describe as a "target rich environment" and could make a genuine contribution to the debate on school improvement by engaging in a discussion of those liabilities. Winerip, however, has managed to avoid almost completely an accurate description of the act's most important issues.

A good example is a February 19, 2003, column about Gonzales Elementary School in Tolleson, Arizona, a school that Winerip implies had been designated, because of NCLB, as "underperforming." The *Times* columnist described a Kafkaesque series of hoops the school's principal had to jump through because of the designation, including devising a detailed school improvement plan. But Winerip conflated the state's accountability system and NCLB. The school would have received the same designation and been required to take the same steps in the absence of NCLB, a fact that Winerip omitted, while writing, "Unfortunately, last year the 5th grade did not make adequate yearly progress on the state competency exams. And that's all it takes under the great new federal law." Incidentally, whatever steps the school took seem to have worked. It did fine the following year under both Arizona's accountability system and No Child Left Behind.

Is it asking too much to expect those in the media charged with writing about education and NCLB to make some effort to describe it accurately?

Are the Feds to Blame?

Routinely rushing to lay blame for local administrative upset at the feet of the feds, Winerip frequently fails to differentiate between state and federal requirements, much less offer readers information to understand why states differ from one another in their policies. For instance, in an April 28, 2004, column, Winerip described a school in Florida as unfairly penalized by NCLB, but he failed to mention that the school reported low overall test scores and had significant achievement gaps between white and minority students. He tartly noted that Texas (was the Lone Star state chosen to make a political point?) operates under different rules than Florida. But he failed to mention that Texas officials simply designed a different accountability plan, and that Florida could have done the same thing.

Likewise, in a September 3, 2003, column examining the differences between state and federal accountability systems, Winerip looked at North Carolina, where, he said, some schools that were doing just fine under the state's previous accountability system were now being flagged as needing improvement under NCLB. He cited this as evidence of the folly of NCLB. What *Times* readers were not told, however, was that before NCLB, North Carolina, like almost every state, did not hold schools accountable for the performance of various subgroups, like minorities and special-needs students. Thus schools with good overall scores often had distinct groups of students that lagged far behind—a glaring inequity that the new federal initiative was explicitly designed to detect, but information Winerip conveniently left out of his story.

Winerip returned to North Carolina in his October 8, 2003, column, this time to bemoan the arbitrary demographic subgroup size of 40 (the minimum number of students that must be in the subgroup for the school to be held accountable for that group). But he failed to tell readers that it was the state, not the feds, that chose that number, that many states have even smaller subgroup sizes (and some larger, too), or that many advocates for poor, minority, and disabled students want small subgroup sizes in order to ensure that students are not lost in overall averages. Instead, without any context, Winerip readers are

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again left to conclude, on the columnist's authority, that there is something arbitrary, if not downright crooked, about all these federal rules.

Missing the Point

Moreover, the inequity teased out by the subgroup rule is the core difference between NCLB and the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Understanding this is integral to making sense of the apparent conflict between state and federal systems. But Winerip referred only in passing to a "totally different federal formula." Regrettably, through all the NCLB trashing, Winerip never described these issues so that lay readers, almost certainly unfamiliar with this context, could at least understand the current environment let alone learn about the complexity of the law and the challenges of designing policy for our decentralized system of schooling.

It's not that Winerip doesn't understand this context himself. Two of his most interesting columns focus on the challenges of the racial achievement gap. Yet inexplicably he never makes the leap from the problems he eloquently describes to NLCB's intent, or potential, to help ferret out and rectify those same racial inequities. Similarly, No Child Left Behind's left-leaning supporters like the Education Trust, Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights, and Council of the Great City Schools, which are all concerned about the achievement gap, do not enter the Winerip conversation either.

Context is also lacking in his September 3 column, where he noted, "The federal system uses a single yearly proficiency goal—for North Carolina, 68 percent of students reading on grade level this year—and requires all schools to make that number." In fact, the "safe harbor" provisions in NCLB mean that all schools do not have to meet fixed targets across the board each year, but only make some improvement in order to make adequate yearly progress. Certainly, provisions like this are somewhat arcane. But a reporter with Winerip's skills could surely make them understandable for readers.

Regrettably, through all the NCLB trashing, Winerip never described these issues so that lay readers, almost certainly unfamiliar with this context, could at least understand the current environment

Besides, North Carolina's relatively high bar is the result of a now somewhat problematic NCLB provision known as the "20 percent rule," which was inserted into the law's "adequate yearly progress" provisions. The concern was that some states would be starting with such low percentages of minority students at grade level that just requiring that as a starting point would subject the law to ridicule for having embarrassingly low standards. However, to ensure rigor, the alternative formula figured a state's starting point as a function of 20 percent of the state's grade-level population of students. In practice the provision has allowed some laggard states, at least initially, to get off easier than states that have been doing the right thing. Thus, paradoxically, many states that have been working to improve their school systems have more schools identified as failing to make adequate yearly progress under NCLB than trailing states. Though this is a complicated issue, it is a classic example of the trade-offs that federal policymakers routinely face and one that a thoughtful education writer with a national platform seemingly could explore for readers.

No Room for Subtlety

But, unfortunately, this sort of nuance finds no home in Winerip's NCLB writing. He criticizes the federal law for basing school accountability on a single year's test scores and holding schools accountable for the performance of transient students. In fact, NCLB does not require states to base school accountability on a single year's test scores, but instead allows scores to be averaged over multiple years and permits states to use various statistical tools to help ensure the validity of those numbers. Nor does the law hold schools accountable for recent transfers. Similarly, Winerip wrote several times about testing disabled students, blaming requirements about assessments for special-needs students on the "Washington Brain Trust." Yet, as mentioned earlier, he neglects to point out that many groups representing disabled students want these students included in state accountability systems. He also fails to share with *Times* readers any perspective on why it can be important to do so to help ensure that these students receive a quality education. Moreover, while criticizing NCLB for requiring new assessments for profoundly retarded students, Winerip makes little effort to explain what alternative assessments for such students would entail, to point out that there was ongoing regulatory debate about how best to design the federal policy in this area, or even to note that these students are a small fraction of the overall special-education population (most of whom benefit from access to mainstream standards).

Through all this, Winerip himself doesn't do what policymakers must do every day—offer solutions to, or ideas about, vexing problems. Aren't any NCLB problems being solved somewhere? What are the alternatives? What's the most creative and serious thinking about addressing equity problems through means other than NCLB? Instead, it's all griping and disparagement. Granted, he's a columnist, not a

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policymaker, but many columnists regularly offer policy ideas, particularly in the midst of continuous slashing criticisms.

Whether bias matters in a news analysis column like this is debatable and, obviously, for the *Times* to decide. Hechinger's Colvin argues that while news analysis does not require the same balance as a news article and can have a viewpoint, "that perspective needs to be backed up with reporting and context." Thomas Toch, a longtime education journalist now working as writer-in-residence at the National Center on Education and the Economy, goes further. Toch notes the importance of the venue, but says Winerip should "be given a lot of leeway to interpret the education landscape as he sees it, to exert his voice in the debate." Either way, there is a difference between viewpoint or voice and a relentlessly misleading presentation.

It's important to note that the problem is not editorializing in the news coverage. In fact, the *Times*'s editorial position is largely supportive of NCLB. Instead, the problem with Winerip's NCLB columns is that they often turn on incomplete, outlandishly selective, and even inaccurate presentations of the facts.

The problem with Winerip's NCLB columns is that they often turn on incomplete, outlandishly selective, and even inaccurate presentations of the facts.

In the end it is beside the point to parse the motives of Winerip's anti-NCLB mania. There are plenty of excellent education journalists out there who could offer readers less slash and burn and more nuance and context about a debate as important as this. In fact, Samuel Freedman, who has been writing "On Education" during Winerip's book leave, is a terrific example. His writing is varied and thought-provoking, but also apparently without ideological blind spots and tendentious selective presentation. In other words, he brings to the page everything an important column like this should regularly deliver.

Andrew J. Rotherham is director of education policy at the Progressive Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., and editor of www.eduwonk.com.

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Who Got the Raw Deal in Gotham?

The Kids or New York Times *Readers?*

Checked:
Michael Winerip, "On Education" columns for the* New York Times, *September and October, 2003

By Joe Williams

When public schools opened in New York City in September 2003 amid reports of widespread classroom overcrowding, parents, educators, and policymakers demanded an explanation. And there, at the ready, was Michael Winerip, the education columnist for the *New York Times*.

The crowding, wrote Winerip in the first of a series of hard-hitting columns in September and October of that year, was caused by the "new students with challenging problems" whose parents took advantage of the No Child Left Behind law allowing them to transfer from a persistently failing school to one that was better. The 1,000-word reports were so convincing that even Mayor Michael Bloomberg began blaming NCLB for what Winerip called the "overloading" of Gotham's middle and high schools. "What the federal law says is that if you are in a failing school, you have a right to demand that your child go to a good school," the mayor said. "There aren't any seats in the good schools. Those are full already anyway."

Unfortunately, it wasn't true. Months after the Winerip columns appeared, after the federal law had been trashed by editorial writers, teachers, and parents, city education officials released transfer tallies showing that kids looking for better schools under NCLB had gotten a bad rap. If there was new overcrowding—and even that was doubtful in many cases—the federal law had not caused it. (In many cases, in fact, overcrowded classrooms turned out to be in school buildings that had additional space, suggesting that the problem was one of local management.)

What the records show is that most of the worst increases had nothing to do with NCLB.

Of course, the *Times* columnist wasn't alone in fanning the flames of the anti-NCLB hysteria, but his influential columns made it easier for city officials to avoid talking about the real reasons for the problems, namely, a demographic bubble that was moving its way through the city's middle and high schools, combined with the city's new initiative to create experimental "schools within schools" in certain buildings, a policy that required a cap on enrollment in some schools at the cost of crowding elsewhere.

For some reason Winerip was intent on finding fault with NCLB. Take Intermediate School 89, in Lower Manhattan, which he profiled in his September 10, 2003, column. He illustrated the problem of the 300-student school's "newly overcrowded classes" by describing a classroom of 37 students where some children were sitting on benches and on the floor. Winerip quoted a teacher who worried that class size could swell to 40 before all was said and done. The principal, Winerip wrote, had been "informed by city officials that she would be receiving many additional student transfers under the federal No Child Left Behind law."

Two weeks later, Winerip's column focused on crowding caused by NCLB at Booker T. Washington Middle School on West 107th Street in Manhattan. "The two 6th-grade classes, taught by Erica Williams and Robyn Block, started with 32 each," he wrote, "and thanks to federal transfers, ballooned to 43 and 41." Concluded Winerip, "Like many other middle schools in New York City, this one is overloaded with children who have transferred in under the federal No Child Left Behind law."

A week later, Winerip crusaded against NCLB overcrowding yet again, announcing in his first paragraph that NCLB "may go down in history as the most unpopular piece of education legislation ever created." Describing crowded conditions at Public School 19 in the Bronx, the column noted that "Ms. O'Boyle's 8th grade class had 40 students"—again suggesting that NCLB kids were to blame.

The same column lamented the crowding at Middle School 141 in the Bronx, which grew by 73 students that year. It also noted that enrollment at Intermediate School 192 in the Bronx grew to 1,370, an increase of more than 13 percent from the 1,211 the previous year. All caused by NCLB, Winerip suggested.

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What the records show is that most of the worst increases had nothing to do with NCLB.

At P.S. 19, for example, where Ms. O'Boyle had 40 8th graders in her room, records showed that none of those students were there because of the federal law. At Intermediate School 89, where Winerip had described children sitting on the floor, the official data showed that while enrollment grew by 18 students, only 12 were NCLB transfers, and even those were spread out over three grades—seven in 6th grade, four in 7th grade, and one in 8th grade. At Middle School 141, which Winerip complained was overcrowded with 73 new students, it turned out that only 29 of them had transferred to the school under NCLB. At I.S. 192, only 51 students, not 159, as Winerip suggested, had transferred in under NCLB. And at Booker T., the records showed that only nine NCLB transfers ended up in the 6th-grade, even though Winerip had suggested that the 6th-grade classrooms of teachers Williams and Block increased by 20 new students because of the federal law.

The other interesting thing to note about Booker T. was that, NCLB aside, there wasn't any overcrowding in the school: According to the New York City School Construction Authority, the school was built to hold 1,104 students and was still, officially, 13 children under capacity.

The I.S. 192 building, which Winerip complained had a double-digit increase in its student body, was built for 1,527 students, meaning it still had room to spare after welcoming all the new students in 2003 (only a third of whom, as we saw, actually arrived because of NCLB). And while it isn't clear why Winerip chose I.S. 89 to profile for his first anti-NCLB installment, it is clear why the city's education department was steering children in that direction: there was room for an additional 159 students. (After several weeks of school, another 6th-grade teacher was added, further minimizing the impact caused by the seven children who transferred to that grade under NCLB.)

In Winerip's rush to judgment, he confirmed the fears of many who opposed the transfer provisions of NCLB, including some parents, teachers, and administrators who were eager to blame crowded classrooms on the outsiders who entered under the law.

No doubt there were numerous problems with the way New York City school officials implemented NCLB in the law's first two school years, as indicated by the city's recent decision to limit NCLB transfers in the 2004–05 school year. And, undoubtedly, local school administrators in New York City, as most anywhere, can be expected to say their school is overcrowded.

At Middle School 141, which Winerip complained was overcrowded with 73 new students, it turned out that only 29 of them had transferred to the school under NCLB.

The facts in this case, however, make it difficult to show that transfers under the law caused overcrowding in 2003, when Winerip was complaining; they even suggest that school officials did an uncharacteristically competent job of linking transferring students with schools that were in the best position to accommodate them. An analysis I did for my newspaper, the *New York Daily News*, compared all 6,979 transfers in the city for 2003–04 with the official building capacity of the receiving schools the previous school year and found that nearly 60 percent of those transfers went to schools with more than enough room to spare.

"We did our best not to overcrowd schools," said Jeremy Lack, of the city's No Child Left Behind office. "And at the end of the day, no student who followed through the process was denied a transfer."

Chancellor Joel Klein even addressed the bad rap that NCLB transfer students were getting in an e-mail to the city's 1,200 principals that fall (2003). In the e-mail, Klein scolded some principals—though taking care not to name those who complained to Winerip—for trying to "protect their own school regardless of what it means for everyone else."

Wrote Klein: "Whatever else you may say about No Child Left Behind, it is forcing us to come to grips with a moral imperative that many of us might prefer to ignore: that we have a collective responsibility for the education of over 1 million children." Needless to say, the *New York Times* education columnist did not mention Klein's memo.

But Winerip, by playing fast and loose with the facts, may have succeeded in killing school choice in New York City after all. In the summer of 2004, school officials announced that they were cutting the transfer rate from 7,000 to 1,000. In the midst of a political campaign, federal officials seemed ready to acquiesce in this gutting of one of NCLB's most important provisions.

Joe Williams is a staff writer on education for the New York Daily News.

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The AFT Hoodwinks the Times

Checked:
F. Howard Nelson, Bella Rosenberg, and Nancy Van Meter, "Charter School Achievement on the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress," American Federation of Teachers, August 2004
Diana Jean Schemo, "Nation's Charter Schools Lagging Behind, U.S. Test Scores Reveal," New York Times, August 17, 2004, page A1

By William G. Howell and Martin R. West

It is not unusual for interest groups to issue reports that further their own political agendas—and to muddle the facts in the process. For this reason, newspapers generally ignore them, treat them with great skepticism, or make sure they properly vet the research with independent observers.

Not so in the case of the study of charter schools leaked by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) to the *New York Times*, which then placed it in the right-hand column of the front page of its August 17 edition—a slot typically reserved for the day's biggest story. Headlined "Nation's Charter Schools Lagging Behind, U.S. Test Scores Reveal," the story sent shock waves through the charter school movement and left more than a few education reformers scrambling for cover.

Using the data tool on the National Center for Education Statistics website, the authors of the AFT study called up some basic numbers on the performance of students from a nationally representative sample of charter schools. Their conclusion: "Charter schools are underperforming." Their evidence: data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often called the nation's report card, showing students in charter schools doing less well than students in other public schools nationally, as well as in a small number of more focused comparisons.

Saying the AFT has historically supported charter schools is like saying that the Chicago Cubs are historically a World Series champion baseball team.

The *Times* had a field day with the news. The AFT's findings, the paper reported, "dealt a blow to supporters of the charter school movement, including the Bush administration"—a blow made all the more powerful (and credible) by the fact that the AFT had "historically supported charter schools." Amy Stuart Wells, a sociology professor at Columbia University Teachers College, was quoted as saying the data were "really, really important" as they "confirm what a lot of people who study charter schools have been worried about." Would that it were that simple.

Where do we begin to sort out the outlandish claims of the AFT study—and those made by others on its behalf? For starters, saying the AFT has historically supported charter schools is like saying that the Chicago Cubs are historically a World Series champion baseball team. While technically true (legendary AFT president Albert Shanker helped introduce the concept in a 1988 speech to the National Press Club), the union's position on the issue has changed so markedly that it is now one of the staunchest opponents of charter schools around the nation. In recent years the AFT has criticized charter schools in a series of reports, of which August's was only the latest and best publicized.

But hardly the most sophisticated. Indeed, on a methodological level, the AFT analyses are sufficiently pedestrian to be laughable. And most mainstream newspapers around the country—once the *Times* had made it the story of the hour—had the good sense to present a more critical view of the study's import. In the title and lead paragraph of its coverage, *USA Today* noted that "achievement [is] not so simply measured" and that critics had already pointed out that "the report is hardly a fair look at whether charter schools help kids improve." The *Seattle Times* quoted University of Washington researcher Mary Beth Celio's dismissal

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of the study as "one of the most unsophisticated, low-level analyses I've ever seen." The editorial board at the *Chicago Tribune* went further, deeming the AFT findings "about as new as a lava lamp, as revelatory as an old sock, and as significant as a belch."

A Flawed Report

What's wrong with the study? The basic problem is straightforward: raw comparisons showing charter school students scoring lower than public school students on standardized tests may simply reflect the fact that charter schools serve students in low-performing districts with high concentrations of poor and minority children. Many states allow charter schools to form only where students are having difficulties, and many charter schools are then asked to accept the most challenging of students. Any credible analysis of their effectiveness must account for these facts on the ground.

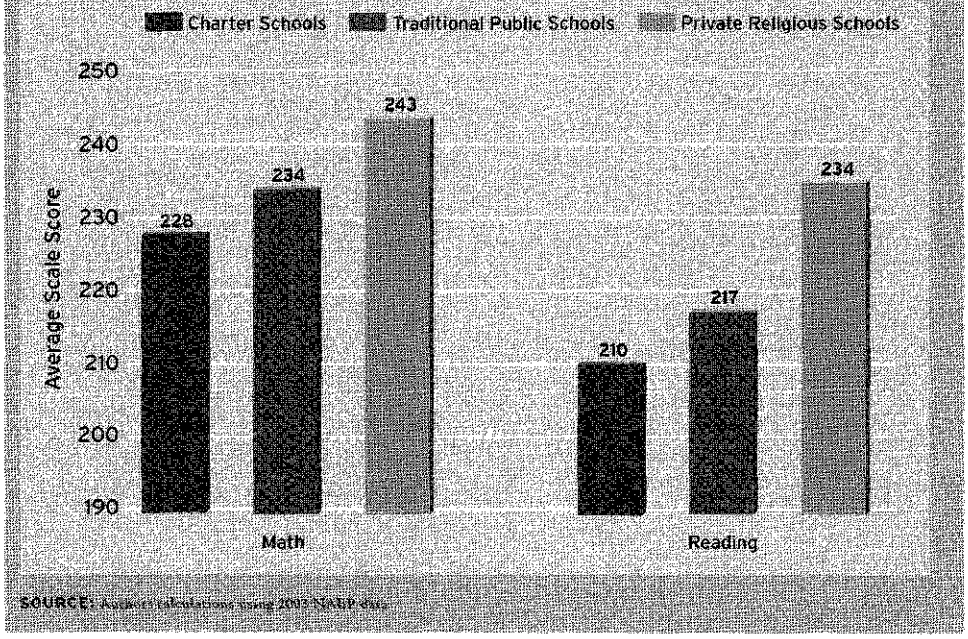
Indeed, if the AFT believes its own findings, it must also concede that private religious schools outperform public schools (see Figure 1). According to the same NAEP data that are the basis for the new AFT study, religious private schools outperformed the public schools nationwide by between 9 and 17 points, a gap at least as large as the public school-charter school difference that the AFT—with considerable help from the *Times*—is trumpeting. On past occasions, the AFT has objected vehemently to interpreting such findings as evidence that religious schools are superior on the grounds that they attract an especially able group of students. But for charter schools, it seems, the problem of selection effects need only be addressed in the most superficial of ways.

The authors' sole strategy to "enhance the fairness of the analysis" was to look separately at students in 14 categories, including those from six different states, those who qualified for the federal free-lunch program (and those who didn't), those from different ethnic backgrounds, and those living inside and outside a central city. As a strategy to control for the background characteristics that differentiate students in charter and traditional public schools, this approach is feeble. At best it can eliminate the effects of differences with respect to one background characteristic at a time. But it may not even be effective for that purpose if, for instance, the students eligible for a free lunch who attend charter schools come from even poorer families than eligible students in traditional public schools.

Even so, in most of the comparisons holding just one characteristic constant, the performance differences between charter and traditional public school students attenuate to the point of statistical insignificance. Twenty-one of the 28 comparisons the AFT conducted using 4th-grade average scale scores are statistically insignificant. As previous research has found that ethnic differences in achievement are large, it is especially noteworthy that all comparisons within ethnic groups in the NAEP charter school data cut against the AFT's overall conclusions. The small differences that remain when looking separately at white, African-American, or Hispanic children are all statistically insignificant—a fact that is not apparent in either the *Times* story's text or the tables that accompanied it.

By the same standard... (Figure 1)

If the AFT claims charter schools are lagging, then it must also concede that private religious schools excel, for the raw scores of students attending religious schools far surpass those of students in traditional public schools. However, all of these gaps could simply reflect differences in students' background characteristics.



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using 2003 NAEP data.

But do any of these comparisons—within ethnic groups or otherwise—tell us anything meaningful about the quality of traditional public, charter, or religious private schools? Not a bit.

Plainly, to account adequately for the influences of a child's family, home environment, and community on his or her learning capacity, one must do much

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more than look separately at students grouped by free-lunch status, ethnicity, or school location. At a minimum, it is essential to gather detailed data on students' background characteristics and to put them to good use. Control variables now standard in education research include parents' education and marital status, household income, and the quality of learning resources in the home, to name but a few. And rather than using aggregate comparisons within subgroups to eliminate the effects of differences in one background characteristic at a time, as the AFT has done, the influence of all of these factors must be addressed simultaneously.

But all this may just scratch the surface. As schools of choice, charters are likely to attract students who are not doing well in their traditional public schools. Moreover, many charter schools explicitly target "at-risk" students. Both of these facts would lead you to expect students in charter schools to perform at a low level even after taking into account their observable background characteristics.

Ideally, one would therefore study charter schools in the context of a randomized field trial, assigning students randomly to attend either a charter or a traditional public school, gathering data on their performance at baseline, and tracking their progress over time. In the absence of that possibility, it is vital to use data from multiple years to track the learning trajectory of students in both charter and traditional public schools.

Yet another critical flaw in the AFT's analysis is its failure to account for the length of time that a charter school has been in place—a factor known to affect any school's performance. Having just hired new staff and teachers, implemented new curricula, and acquired building facilities, new schools often face considerable start-up problems. Almost one-third of the charter schools nationwide were less than two years old when the 2003 NAEP was administered, raising doubts about whether even meaningful findings about charter school performance would apply when more of them are well established.

Encouragingly, research on charter schools using more reliable methods to gauge school quality is under way. Nonetheless, it will be some time before definitive conclusions about the merits of one of the nation's most prominent, and popular, reform strategies can be drawn. In the meantime, the AFT's study does not even amount to a good interim report.

Why All the Fuss?

Given all of these problems, why would the *Times* see fit to bestow instant credibility on the AFT study by granting it glowing, page-one coverage? While we have no special insight into the motives of the newspaper's editorial staff, the coverage itself suggests two factors that are important.

Timeliness and transparency are important, but bad information is worse than none.

The first concerns alleged chicanery by the U.S. Department of Education, which, reported the *Times*, had buried the flawed charter school findings in "mountains of data . . . released without public announcement." According to the authors of the AFT study, "a combination of intuition, prior knowledge, considerable digging, and luck" was required just to locate the data. Such sleuthing makes for dramatic storytelling—for the next best thing to doing it oneself, in the newspaper business, is reporting (exclusively, one hopes, so you can break the news) on someone else's discovery of a cover-up.

As Bella Rosenberg, one of the report's three authors, explained to the press, "Analyses are always welcome, but first things first. . . . Surely the interests of children are better served by timely and straightforward information about whether charter school performance measures up to the claims made for it." In a letter to the *Times*, educational psychologist Howard Gardner praised the AFT for its act of public service in issuing the study and then asserted that the Department of Education's decision not to highlight the findings was ideologically driven: "If the results had been positive, the Education Department would doubtless have heralded them. Across the policy spectrum, the pattern of the administration is all too clear: Call for evidence-based results, tout them when supportive, hide them when not, spin them when possible."

Perhaps. But we draw a slightly different conclusion. Timeliness and transparency are important, but bad information is worse than none. And uncovering misleading information and presenting it out of context does a greater disservice to the "interests of children" than the Department of Education's decision not to issue a report that does not control for student background characteristics. From this perspective, the AFT study and the *Times*'s breathless coverage of it only made a bad situation worse.

The second probable reason for the prominent attention the *Times* gave the study stems from the fact that charter schools represent one of several remedies for schools deemed chronically failing under George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act. (Other remedies include replacing much of the school's staff or turning its operations over to the state or to a private company.) Thus the story's import was magnified by the politics of

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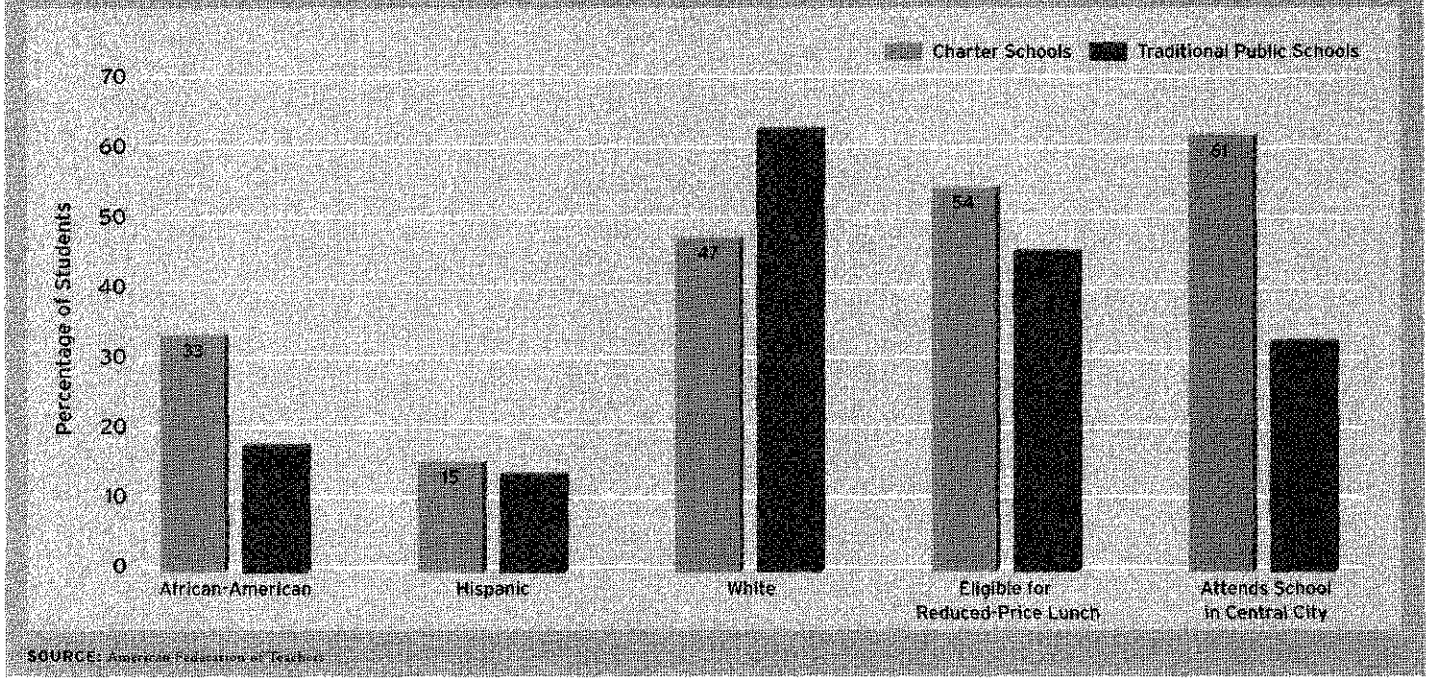
Who's schooling whom? (Figure 2)

The NAEP data confirm what many have long claimed: that charter schools educate a disproportionately disadvantaged student population.



SOURCE: American Federation of Teachers

education reform: it suggested a flaw in the Bush administration's game plan. The very next day, the lead *Times* editorial heralded the report as "a devastating setback" to the Bush administration's education program.

Ironically, however, it is not at all clear that political cleavages over charter schools follow strictly partisan lines. Indeed, federal financial support for the charter school movement has its origins in the Clinton era. Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry was an enthusiastic supporter of charter schools. And while Secretary of Education Rod Paige was a vocal proponent of charter schools, President Bush said hardly a word about charters on the campaign trail—nor, for that matter, did he say much about them from the White House.

What the NAEP Data Do Tell Us

While the statistics on the nation's charter schools currently available from the NAEP are not at all useful for assessing these schools' effectiveness, they do offer, for the first time, a glimpse of the makeup of a nationally representative sample of the students who attend them. As a result, one important fact about charter schools now appears incontrovertible: they are not bastions of wealth and privilege.

As Figure 2 shows, almost 62 percent of the roughly 3,000 4th graders in the NAEP charter school sample attend a school located in a central city, compared with just 32 percent of NAEP 4th graders in traditional public schools. Roughly 33 percent of the charter school students are African-American, compared with only 18 percent of the public school students. Fifty-four percent of elementary charter school students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch programs, compared with 46 percent of public school students. The analogous differences for the 8th graders tested by the NAEP are even more pronounced, perhaps reflecting the fact that a large number of middle and high school charters target at-risk students.

Given the conditions under which states and districts accept charter schools, the language of their mandates, and the characteristics of families most eager for alternatives to traditional public schools, these differences can hardly come as a surprise. For the foreseeable future, charter schools are likely to serve high concentrations of poor and underprivileged students. What remains unclear is how much they can do for this population. Sadly—and despite the impression given by the gray lady of American journalism—the AFT study tells us nothing about that.

William G. Howell is an assistant professor of government at Harvard University.
Martin R. West is a research fellow at the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University and the research editor of Education Next.

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The Softening of American Education

Schools in the Real World

Hard America, Soft America: Competition vs. Coddling and the Battle for the Nation's Future

By Michael Barone

Crown Forum, 2004, $22.00; 188 pages.

As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

Reading the title and subtitle and some of the jacket copy of Michael Barone's new book, one could conclude one has gotten the point immediately, and it is hardly necessary to go further. Quoting from the book, the jacket copy says, "From ages six to eighteen Americans live mostly in what I call Soft America—the parts of our country where there is little competition and accountability. But from ages eighteen to thirty Americans live mostly in Hard America—the parts of American life subject to competition and accountability." Driving the point home, it claims, "Educators, for example, protect children from the rigors of testing, ban dodgeball, and promote just about any student who shows up. But most adults quickly figure out that how they do depends on what they produce."

But it would be an error to simply leap to the conclusion that the contrast between "hard" and "soft" America is all that's being said. Barone, one of the founders and authors of the dense and fact-filled *Almanac of American Politics* and the author of a history of the United States in the 20th century (*Our Country: The Shaping of America From Roosevelt to Reagan*), knows a great deal about our country and provides much to chew on in his reprise of our history since World War II. That war, as we might expect, revealed America in its hard aspect, and it came immediately on the heels of a prolonged hard period of American life: the Great Depression, preceded by a period of rapid industrialization, absent any public programs for the poor and the unemployed and the maimed and the widowed. This was the world of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, in Barone's presentation. Softened somewhat by the tentative beginning of social programs under the New Deal, it was still a hardened America that fought World War II. Then quite rapidly, according to Barone, we entered an extended period of increasing softness.

Barone thinks that today we are close to the right balance between hardness and softness —except in education.

Barone begins each chapter with discussion of a characteristic novel of the period. The softened postwar America is in the background in Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* of 1953 (it is not the detective but his clients who have become softened) and John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich* of 1981. Rabbit is now selling well-made Toyotas rather than flabby and undependable General Motors Buicks. The softened America at its nadir—with undemanding schools, unpunished crime, rampant welfare, a feckless army under a timid national policy in Vietnam—is the setting for Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* of 1970 and Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* of 1973. But a new period of hardening ensues, at different times for particular segments of American life, and in his conclusion Barone is enthusiastic about the performance of American business and entrepreneurship and American military might in Iraq (both wars) and Afghanistan. No novel as yet characterizes this period of increasing and satisfactory hardening.

Barone thinks that today we are close to the right balance between hardness and softness—except in education. In fact, the chief example of Soft America throughout this account is American education, and, in particular, the public schools, elementary and secondary. The story begins with the triumph of progressivism in education before World War II, and matters do not improve much thereafter. Barone is fair in his treatment of John Dewey, and he writes that progressivism's "advocates misinterpreted Dewey's ideas, as he himself protested in 1938." Barone does note a brief period of attempted hardening after Sputnik, in 1957, when SAT scores reached their high point, in 1963. But this effort at hardening was abandoned with the rise of the civil-rights movement of the 1960s.

Barone applauds the civil-rights movement, but nevertheless sees it as

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contributing to a destructive softening in education. Convinced of how unjustly and unfairly they had treated blacks, he writes, "Americans were determined to assuage and compensate for [the past]. And compensating for such injustice meant softening many parts of American life—the criminal justice system, welfare programs, schooling, and more." Affirmative action in colleges and universities was another example of a softness that lowered standards. Barone records in some detail the efforts since 1983 to make American education tougher, more competitive, but he notes the obstacles to setting higher standards for education. His account of the travails of American education is competent—he is guided in large part by Diane Ravitch's excellent histories—but not particularly searching.

Intriguing as his master concepts are, and useful as they are in suggesting one way of ordering our recent history, his own effort is somewhat undermined by a degree of partisanship that peeks through his account and upsets its balance. In his conclusion, for instance, referring to the just-concluded presidential campaign, he says: "Important issues of Softness and Hardness are at stake [and] two key issues are whether to retain the Bush tax cuts and whether to add individual investment accounts to Social Security." These are favored causes of the current administration and the *Wall Street Journal*, but I do not see as clearly as Barone does their connection to softness and hardness. Lower taxes are not commonly seen as acts of hardness: to Barone they are. For Barone, the economic record in the 1990s is a vindication of hard policies. But this decade of success, in his account, owes nothing to a Democratic president: Even welfare reform, a clear success for hardness, which President Clinton advocated, is attributed to the Republican Congress.

Barone is not uniformly an opponent of softness: He realizes that a mix of softness and hardness is necessary in any enterprise, though clearly his heart is on the side of hardness. In his telling, softness in America was overcome in punishment of crime, in welfare, in the easy life in stable and unchallenged corporations, in armed forces that had lost sight of what it meant to win. But softness in education has successfully resisted change. Our schools are the chief holdout against hardness in his drama, and here the usual culprits are at fault—the schools of education, the eminences in the field of education, the school bureaucracies, the unions. But nothing new is brought to the indictment.

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Barone does not dwell on some anomalies in this story. In Europe, he says, schools are hard; but then life becomes soft because of the benefits of the welfare state. In the United States we see the reverse. Barone does not bother to explore whether this is a better balance. Perhaps Europeans need to work less (they do) because their schools do more? Is it the current bias in certain circles against "Old Europe" that prevents him from inquiring into whether this might be a better balance?

An even deeper question troubles me. Certainly, in its standards American elementary and secondary education is soft. Barone has a good word for post–high school education. He approves of community colleges, higher education generally, even vocational education—they teach real skills and how to work. Hard America for him begins at age 18. But it is not my impression that American education is as soft for students as Barone assumes. For those aspiring to college, a very large fraction, there is a good deal of anxiety and pressure. Even those not aspiring to Ivy League and similar schools feel the pressure—getting into the four-year state schools, rather than the community colleges, is demanding for many. What explains this combination of low standards and felt pressure? Perhaps our problem is the number of students, compared with those in Europe, who come from immigrant and non-English-speaking homes and the number who come from minority groups still suffering the consequences of various kinds of deprivation. Barone has made a good first cut in making the distinction between Hard and Soft America, but one would have to go deeper to understand the chief holdout against a hard America, American public education.

Nathan Glazer is the author of, among other books, We Are All Multiculturalists Now *(Harvard University Press, 1998), and the editor, with John Montgomery, of* Sovereignty under Challenge: How Governments Respond *(Transaction Publishers, 2002).*

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Reading, Writing, and Willpower

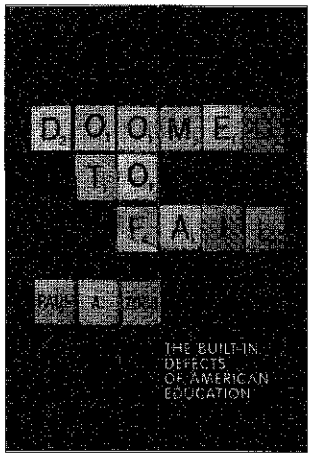
Getting Kids to Care

Doomed to Fail: The Built-In Defects of American Education

by Paul A. Zoch

Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2004. 237 pp., $26.95.

As reviewed by Diane Ravitch



Paul Zoch manages to achieve what some might have thought impossible in the opening words of his new book, *Doomed to Fail*: he criticizes the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (Chester E. Finn Jr.) and the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (Linda Darling-Hammond) for committing the same error. Although these two institutions are usually seen as antagonists, both, he says, blame teachers when students do not learn. Zoch lumps together the Fordham Foundation report "Better Teachers, Better Schools" and the National Commission's "What Matters Most" as reports that assume a direct causal relationship between a teacher's actions and the students' learning. Zoch contends that they are both wrong. Students are responsible for their learning, he writes. If they make sufficient effort, pay attention, do their homework, and exercise self-discipline, they will learn.

A high school teacher of the classics for nearly 20 years, Zoch has written a stunning critique of American education. He shows how reform after reform has gone forward with the same assumptions: that students are passive recipients of instruction, that teachers are all-powerful molders of inert student clay, and that students have no responsibility for their own academic success.

Ultimately, Zoch maintains, all education is self-education. The secret of academic success is no different from success in other fields of endeavor, and it involves hard work, the will to succeed, and practice, practice, practice. Yet when students fail or become bored, critics insist that it is the teacher's fault.

Students are responsible for their learning. . . . If they make sufficient effort, pay attention, do their homework, and exercise self-discipline, they will learn.

Zoch shows persuasively and in great detail that progressives derided instruction but never held students accountable for their own learning; it is always the teacher who is to blame if the children aren't motivated. Consequently, students have come to expect that their teachers must entertain them. As one of Zoch's students said to him one day, "Maybe if you'd sing and dance, we'd learn this stuff."

Most of the book is a brilliant recapitulation of the history of American education, written from Zoch's perspective as a seasoned classroom teacher. He demonstrates convincingly that American education has been deeply influenced by seemingly inconsistent philosophies. His own personal lodestar is William James, the great Harvard psychologist, who understood that the key to individual success is effort: the student who strives and persists in the face of challenge will succeed. James's message of personal responsibility and willpower, Zoch hastens to point out, is now considered Victorian, old-fashioned, obsolete. Yet he also notes that the students who "live in accordance with old-fashioned principles of effort and will to succeed are the stars of our public schools, the usually unsung heroes who in the future will provide the great brainpower of our country. Such students are actively working to create their own reality and destiny." Sadly, he observes, students who live by these values learn them at home, not at school, for our public schools today are founded on an ideology diametrically opposed to James's beliefs.

The current philosophy that dominates American education, Zoch demonstrates, is a strange concoction that has produced our current woeful situation. Behaviorists (James B. Watson, Edward L. Thorndike, and B. F. Skinner) encouraged the view that students were simple, passive, and easily manipulated. According to behaviorist principles, it is no longer "incumbent upon the student to do what is necessary to succeed," for it is the responsibility of the teacher "to find the right stimulus that will cause a

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student to respond as desired." In the behaviorist worldview, the environment is all, and the student is passive and as helpless as an infant.

Along come John Dewey, William Heard Kilpatrick, Colonel Francis Parker, G. Stanley Hall, and other progressives, whose philosophies relieved students of responsibility to make the necessary effort to learn unless they wanted to. Like the behaviorists, Dewey saw the classroom environment (created by the teacher) as ultimately determinative of whether students learn. Kilpatrick and other leading progressives thought that if teachers could discover children's natural interests, then learning would be easy and fun. Hall worried that studying hard was actually dangerous to children's health. The possibility that a student might "struggle and strain" to learn something not of his own choosing was foreign to progressive theorists. Indeed, they emphasized the importance of joy, not effort. Zoch shows that progressive dogmas about natural learning are clearly in conflict with the Jamesian philosophy of effort and insists that parents and teachers teach "the will to succeed" by setting clear expectations and demanding effort, not accepting laziness.

Zoch argues that the progressive philosophy, like behaviorism, puts the onus on the teacher to be perfect, imaginative, ingenious, and all-powerful. Both philosophies assume that the teacher can and must create exactly the right environment or the student will not learn. Furthermore, if the teacher follows progressivist dictates, she will never exercise authority in the classroom but will appeal instead to the children's needs and interests. The teacher must be not only entertaining but also able to individualize instruction for each child, who is expected to learn at his or her own pace and in accordance with his or her individual learning style. The problem, Zoch says, is that teachers are expected to work hard to motivate kids, but kids aren't expected to do anything other than wait for the teacher to motivate them.

As a classroom teacher in Texas, Zoch spices his narrative with a few of his own bitter experiences. This book may have been inspired on the day he attended a professional development session and received a document headed "Student Learning Occurs When . . ." Every succeeding statement described what the teacher must do: 1. A teacher is skilled in teaching techniques; 2. A teacher is skilled in identifying student needs, etc. But not a single statement described what the student must do. What most irritated Zoch was that the verb "occurs" is intransitive, implying that the student has no responsibility to do anything to make learning occur.

The paradox that Zoch highlights is that the American public wants orderly classrooms with high standards, but American parents don't mean it when it comes to their own child.

Zoch takes a few solid pokes at the much-ballyhooed cognitive revolution, brain-based learning, multiple intelligences, learning styles, and other faddish approaches. All of them, he holds, have the same effect, which is to absolve the students of any responsibility for their achievement. Either they are just wired that way genetically or their teachers have failed to individualize instruction enough or make it joyful enough.

The paradox that Zoch highlights is that the American public wants orderly classrooms with high standards, but American parents don't mean it when it comes to their own child. Zoch sagely warns: "Students must learn to create their own success and to succeed despite inimical circumstances, for the simple reason that the circumstances of life will never be optimal." If we cannot expect students to achieve until every child has a perfect teacher, Zoch warns, we will wait a long time indeed, because the number of such paragons will always be small. We would do students a favor, he says, if we taught them that their success depends on what they do, not on what someone else does for them.

Strange that American education should have evolved according to a philosophy that is fundamentally at odds with the self-reliance that has always been a strong element in American society. It is as though entire communities were to decide that they could improve their football teams by spending millions on professional development for coaches. Zoch's engaging book, if widely read, will introduce an important element that has been missing from most of the talk about school reform: student effort.

Diane Ravitch is Research Professor of Education at New York University and a member of the Koret Task Force at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

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BOOK ALERT

The New Division of Labor: How Computers Are Creating the Next Job Market, by Frank Levy and Richard J. Murnane (Princeton University Press).

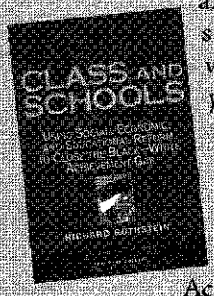
On the big screen, self-aware and insubordinate robots mount organized rebellions that are defeated only by grand acts of human heroism. In the real world, policy challenges posed by new technologies are less dramatic, but only slightly less daunting.

As economists Levy and Murnane explain, computers excel at tasks that can be reduced to the application of a set of rules (if X, then do Y), but fall short when it comes to more complex tasks involving the recognition of patterns (this reminds me of the time . . .). The distinction, while hardly clear-cut, is useful. For instance, it explains why the rise of computers has not led to mass unemployment, as early observers worried, but instead has increased demand for workers capable of nonroutine, expert thinking.

The authors embrace "standards-based reform" as a means of bolstering our flagging school system to meet this demand, wisely noting that proficiency in core academic subjects is a prerequisite for higher-order tasks. Unfortunately, they also deem improvement in education a "slow and difficult process" that "cannot reach everyone"—thoughts seemingly inconsistent with the sense of urgency that authentic reform will require.

Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap, by Richard Rothstein (Economic Policy Institute).

Nobody who followed Richard Rothstein's columns in the *New York Times* or his earlier work on education will be surprised that his new book ascribes most of the black-white achievement gap to social class and economics. In effect, he devotes this book to affirming James Coleman's 1966 finding that school differences have far less impact on achievement differences than do family characteristics, the mightiest of which, Rothstein says, is socioeconomic status.



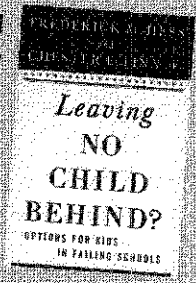
Rothstein insists that contemporary school reforms cannot overcome that influence and therefore urges (if the country is serious about the gap closing) that we focus on equalizing income, housing, health care, and such. Indeed, Rothstein states, "If the nation can't close the gaps in income, health, and housing, there is little prospect of equalizing achievement." He also tries to debunk some well-known examples of schools and educators that succeed with disadvantaged minority youngsters. He deprecates claims made by, among others, the Heritage Foundation, the Education Trust, KIPP Academies, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, and Jaime Escalante's biographers, insisting that the achievements don't amount to much or couldn't be replicated or that the schools engage in cream skimming. The book, therefore, seeks to throw ice water on just about every popular form of contemporary school-centered reform.

And he does not hesitate to gore left as well as right, warning, for example, that today's spate of "adequacy lawsuits" (which seek to reshape school finance by having judges force states to spend "adequate" amounts of money on schooling) runs a risk of overpromising.

Is he right? Do we quit trying to fix the schools we've got while we wait for radical social changes to be made? Is this not a counsel of despair that plays right into the tendency of some educators to say, "We're doing all that should be expected of us, given the kids we're being sent from the homes they're being sent from, so stop demanding more from us?"

Readers may also wish to read an important new essay by sociologist George Farkas, "The Black-White Test Score Gap" (*Contexts*, Spring 2004), which says that the racial rift is caused, more than any other thing, by divergent child-rearing practices (and preschool opportunities). Farkas doesn't exactly contradict Rothstein, but he offers a more hopeful and actionable scenario instead of, in effect, suggesting that we sit on our hands until the Promised Land arrives.

Leaving No Child Behind? Options for Kids in Failing Schools, by Frederick M. Hess and Chester E. Finn Jr., eds. (Palgrave).



If schools are found to be "failing" under *No Child Left Behind*, what happens to the children in them? According to the new law, after two years parents may choose another school in the same district and, one year later, they may obtain tutoring or other educational services.

But what happens in practice? Two years into the law's implementation may be too soon to draw definitive conclusions, but this collection of essays, prepared under the direction of two of the editors of this journal, hints at a number of emerging

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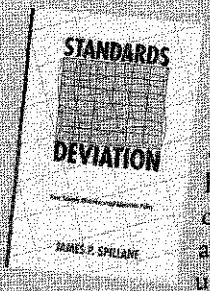
problems: Choice is too limited, mechanisms to enforce compliance are lacking, and parents are not yet well informed.

If the material is at times excessively thick with factual detail, it is marvelously thin on ideological moralizing and full of practical suggestions for improving the law. One recommendation worth noting: Give parents more ready access to the popular tutoring option.



Standards Deviation: How Schools Misunderstand Education Policy, *by James P. Spillane (Harvard University Press).*

Spillane argues that problems in implementing education policy are due primarily to insufficient attention to the "sense-making" needs of educators, by which he means the ability of teachers and administrators to understand the task assigned to them. He reaches this conclusion after interviewing administrators and surveying teachers about the implementation of new math and science curricula and other instructional material introduced in Michigan between 1989 and 1996.

The author makes sense when he notes that people find it easier to implement ideas with which they are familiar and that they commonly interpret new policies through a lens conditioned by existing routines. But he ignores what previous studies have repeatedly shown: Local self-interests and perverse institutional incentives are the main obstacles to reform. The author instead takes the naive view that roadblocks are merely "cognitive" and can be overcome by more training and trust.

Unfortunately, Spillane does not sufficiently acknowledge that the lessons learned from Michigan are limited to just a few of the needed reforms. It is easier to change curricula than to alter administrative or teaching practice.

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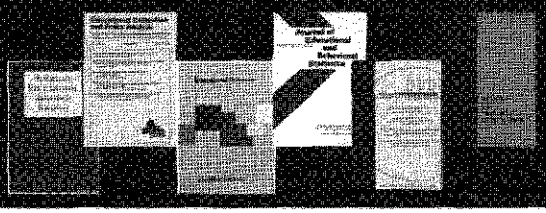

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by ROBERT SLATER

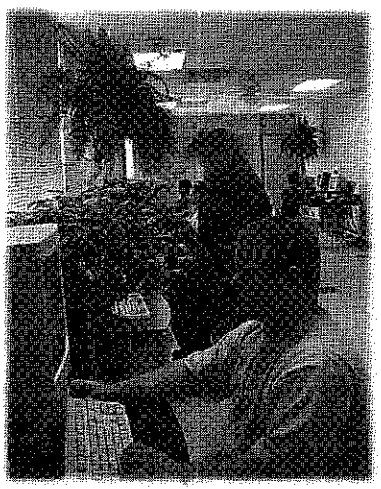
Field Notes—02/12/03

A Day in the Life of an Education Professor Who Came Down from the Ivory Tower to Start a Charter School

8:00 a.m. I got my son Thomas to school on time, but had to return an hour later for an Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD). Thomas is autistic—and was about to flunk physics. He had been entering middle school when I started a charter school several years ago, thinking I could create a more user-friendly instructional environment for him. He's now a junior—at the local public high school.

He often reminds me that only one of the three years he spent in the school I founded was good; the other two positively "sucked."

Luckily, my reasons for starting a charter did not all revolve around my disabled son. What tenured education professor doesn't harbor a secret desire to start a school? We got the doors of the Brazos School for Inquiry & Creativity open in August of 1999, in a church in Bryan, Texas' only Hispanic barrio. Something they don't teach you in education schools: We had advertised for middle school students, but discovered that to get them we had to take their brothers and sisters too. That first year we had about 40 kids scattered across grades K–10.



10:00 a.m. After the ARD meeting, I checked my cell-phone message box. It was full. It must be the school's new program. We've just rejiggered it, adding more computers. It's generating a lot of interest. We've already got a waiting list. Discipline problems have dropped almost to zero, and this is with kids that came to us mainly because of discipline issues. . . .

10:15 a.m. Carolyn from the bank called. My main problem today, as it has been all week, is the usual one: money. The automatic deposits that Region IV said were coming in haven't hit the account yet. Carolyn said she'll cover any overdrafts, but we'll have to pay the overdraft fees.

I also called the Telecommunication Infrastructure Board people again. Once more they routed the request for funds to the wrong person. Come on! We started this process last November. . . . Board meetings are also becoming somewhat of a drag. Politics. It's ironic, perhaps, because when I incorporated the nonprofit that holds the charter in 1998, I called it "Democratic Schools Research, Inc." In my mind, this is still a research project, and research projects can only be so democratic.

In my mind this is still a research project and research projects can only be so democratic.

1:00 p.m. After lunch I drove up to our Old Hearne Road school, where we have about 20 high school students in our 21st-century classroom. You could put a classroom like this anywhere in the world. Computer workstations and lots of plants. Several kids were working on their PowerPoints for the week. I liked what they were doing, the interaction they were having, but I couldn't help wondering how they would do on the state-mandated test that was coming up next month.

3:10 p.m. I drove down to the Autumn Circle campus, which houses our 65 Pre-K through grade eight kids, and where I have my office. My mailbox there was crammed with stuff from vendors and the state. There was also a note from a parent complaining about the lunches. Our principal, an energetic and highly efficient young Korean-American woman, was eager to fill me in on recent events and happenings. Obviously, I wasn't going to get to my university office today.

Epilogue

Eighteen months have passed since that (pretty typical) day in February. Our total enrollment across four schools is now 260. The literature says that 250 is the magic number. We'll see. We've also had 18 more of our students graduate from high school, half of whom were the first in their families to do so. Money is only slightly less burdensome—and our board is still a bit too unwieldy. But I've switched phones and have a Blackberry. I got Thomas one of his old tutors from the Brazos School, and he passed his physics course. And I still have my day job.

Robert Slater is founder of the Brazos School for Inquiry & Creativity and professor, Educational Administration and Human Development, Texas A&M University.

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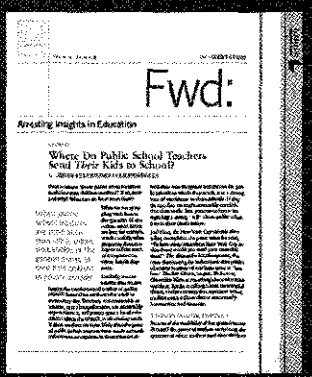

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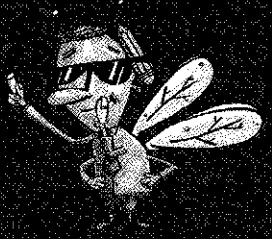

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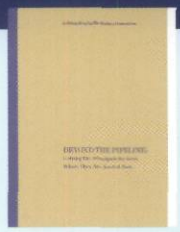
How Leadership *Influences Student* Learning

Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson, Kyla Wahlstrom
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto;
Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, University of Minnesota (2004, 17 pages)

This extensive literature review concludes that leadership is second only to classroom instruction in improving student learning and that the effects of successful leadership are greatest in troubled schools. The report finds that there are virtually no documented instances of schools being turned around without the intervention of a powerful leader.



Beyond the Pipeline: Getting the Principals We Need, Where They Are Needed Most

Lee Mitgang
The Wallace Foundation (2003, 12 pages)

This policy brief, which synthesizes three research reports, disputes the belief that there is a nationwide shortage of certified principal candidates. What is lacking are incentives and working conditions to attract principals to difficult schools, hiring practices that reflect heightened performance expectations, and job definitions that focus on student learning.

Other recommended reading from The Wallace Foundation:

A Matter of Definition: Is There Truly a Shortage of School Principals?
Marguerite Roza, with Mary Beth Celio, James Harvey, Susan Wishon
Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington (2003, 60 pages)

Who Is Leading Our Schools? An Overview of School Administrators and Their Careers
Susan M. Gates, Jeanne S. Ringel, Lucrecia Santibañez, Karen E. Ross, Catherine H. Chung
RAND (2003, 151 pages)

The Careers of Public School Administrators: Policy Implications from an Analysis of State-Level Data
RAND (2004, 4 pages)

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